



## Frames of Reference

### How Men and Women Can Overcome Communication Barriers – and Increase Their Effectiveness at Work

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- There are two kinds of conversation interruptions—those intended to control and redirect and those to support and enhance
- Controllers and redirectors (usually men) try to get their own particular point across, give the topic a different spin, or change the topic altogether
- Because women usually yield in the face of this kind of confrontational atmosphere, controlling and redirecting can be costly in the workplace because their valuable input is lost

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- “Tapestry talkers,” on the other hand, are speakers of either gender, who generally do not mind being interrupted
- Their idea of a conversation is everybody talking at once
- They are accustomed to being infringed upon and will allow it or not, depending on how they feel at the moment
- Being interrupted is not an issue, especially since most tend to be supportive rather than competitive

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- Tapestry talk is used, not to seize control or change the topic but to agree with, support, and elaborate on what the other person is saying
- In general, women use tapestry talk more frequently than men.

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- Another kind of interruption that frequently occurs in the workplace has to do with the work process
- Managers sometimes interrupt a staffer's efforts at solving a problem or learning how to do something (especially if the staffer is a woman) by moving in too quickly to help out
- Like conversation interruptions, poorly timed intrusions into a work process can prevent people from learning what they need to learn and from contributing as fully as they should

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- On the other hand, managers sometimes allow others—most frequently men—to struggle too long alone
- Before you rush to someone's rescue, do a quick freeze frame and ask yourself, "Am I about to rescue this person prematurely?"
- Then reframe your actions and think about what would best promote employee growth

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## Anatomy of Interruptions

- If you are the one struggling with a problem but are unaccustomed to asking for help, set a finite time limit
- If you have not succeeded within that time frame, get help
- Make sure you invite and accept only the kind of help you really need – either the solution to the problem, or instructions on how to solve the problem

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## Direction and Indirection

- Most men value direct statements and prefer to “tell it like it is” rather than “waste time beating around the bush”, women on the other hand, tend to be circuitous, or “polite.”
- So it is no wonder that the genders frequently misread each other’s directness or the lack of it
- Women usually blame themselves for giving faulty instruction; men tend to blame the recipients for failing to understand

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## Direction and Indirection

- Degrees of directness also can affect the impact of constructive criticism and even change it entirely
- Women can sometimes be too direct and too frequent with praise, which men tend to hear as insincerity or apple-polishing
- Men can be too indirect by not offering praise frequently enough

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## Direction and Indirection

- Women generally assume that if nothing is said, it means their work is not satisfactory, which can be demoralizing
- Oblique recognition does little to contribute to a motivating environment for either gender
- To help decide when praise is in order and also to prevent yourself from overdoing it, take the word "noteworthy" literally, and ask if the behavior you have observed is worthy of your making note of it

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## Direction and Indirection

- Men and women can also be distanced by the fact that women frequently respond in kind when someone praises their work efforts
- "Since you've said something nice about my work, I'll say something positive about you in return."
- Most men, however, do not feel so compelled, and their male colleagues usually do not expect them to do so

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## Direction and Indirection

- If women expect and wait for such reciprocity from men, they are likely to be disappointed and even angry
- So, when offering praise, do so unconditionally

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## Direction and Indirection

- When you offer constructive criticism with the intent of helping someone grow, do not waste time beating around the bush
- Yet too direct an approach to criticism may cause some people, primarily but not only women, to recoil from what they hear as blunt or even brutal delivery
- When this happens, they are not likely to learn very much from whatever insight is being shared

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## Direction and Indirection

- On the other hand, saying something too obliquely, even sandwiching a negative comment between two positive ones, can also cause serious miscommunication
- If you want to help your teammates improve, you must offer criticism in a way that produces maximum benefits

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## Direction and Indirection

- Do not pull your punches
- Be direct about indicating the consequences of poor performance
- Be specific and stick to the facts
- Criticize the work and not the person

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## Direction and Indirection

- Criticism is always a gift if you let it help you learn
- Even invalid criticism will help you gain some knowledge – mostly about the critic
- So when receiving an unflattering appraisal, try to ignore the delivery and focus on the content, ask for specifics, and postpone responding until you can be more objective

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## **To Be Succinct, or Not to Be**

- In business, where time is really money and where people must deal with so much information from so many sources, the point of most discussions usually has to be immediate
- Therefore, succinctness is something that experience has taught men to value and demonstrate, and is a skill that everyone needs to acquire

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## **To Be Succinct, or Not to Be**

- Not only is it more cost-effective, it suggests an inner confidence – an attitude that enhances one's professional image
- Nonetheless, succinctness also has a negative side
- Asking for or offering few details can cause one to overlook crucial information or to make promises that cannot be kept
- Important questions remain unasked and flaws in logic go unnoticed

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## **To Be Succinct, or Not to Be**

- Still, “cut to the chase” is something many men say, and they frequently say it to women
- Why? Because many women prefer to offer abundant and time-consuming detail and generally require the same of others
- If it is not forthcoming, they have the uncomfortable feeling that they are missing something
- It is productive for everyone to examine all the relevant details without dwelling on them

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## **To Be Succinct, or Not to Be**

- Overloading on details, however, can lead to analysis paralysis, which can generate a well-earned reputation for indecisiveness
- Detail dwellers also have a reputation for calling meetings that nobody, especially really busy people, want to attend
- Insisting on full details all the time suggests a lack of confidence in your own achievements and in the capabilities of others
- The trick then is to learn when to expand the use of detail and when to contract it

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- Personal disclosure, the sharing of information about oneself and demonstrating an interest in learning about others, plays an important role in the workplace as a relationship tool worth learning to utilize effectively
- Women and men, however, have widely divergent ideas about what constitutes personal disclosure and how to use it at work

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- Women disclose personal information as a means of establishing trustworthiness; so they start sharing their interests and concerns immediately, expecting others to do the same
- People who fail to offer similar self-revelation risk being perceived as untrustworthy, or at least questionably aloof

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- Men, on the other hand, generally will not disclose personal information until they already trust the other person.
- Yet what they usually end up sharing are their views on sports, business, or politics rather than their feelings about some intimate issue
- As far as they are concerned, their views on sports are intimate because sports are something they deem personally important

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- Men consider it prying when women attempt to draw them out about personal topics
- Women view a man's silence about personal issues as distant and withholding
- "How much personal material is appropriate to share in the workplace?" An effective rule of thumb is to avoid sharing anything that you would not want spread to people other than the one you initially took into your confidence

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- More specifically, think before you talk about personal changes that will affect your employment circumstances, health issues, sexual prowess and partners, and wage and salary information
- Taking a broader view of what constitutes personal disclosure will help you to recognize it and to profit from its value in bringing people together

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## Using Personal Disclosure

- When men talk sports and business, women can reframe these discussions as a type of self-disclosure
- Men can reframe a woman's personal disclosure as an effort to share something their coworkers consider important
- In casual conversation, especially, people often reveal other things in addition to what they are saying about as specific topic under discussion. If you listen for this "fee information," you will find topics of common interest that can be comfortably shared.

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## **KIVA The Healing Power of Laughter**

- Recent research suggests that when people can laugh together in the workplace, they come to consider it a positive environment
- As a consequence, job satisfaction increases and productivity improves

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## **KIVA The Healing Power of Laughter**

- When gender is brought into the equation, divisiveness is more than a mere possibility
- Most of the time, the two genders not only fail to understand and share each other's humor, they can even be annoyed or severely offended by it
- If men wish to share a dirty joke, they can do so on their own time, away from the workplace
- If women wish to engage in male-bashing, they can do the same

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## **KIVA The Healing Power of Laughter**

- Whatever else you do, avoid encouraging others to laugh at your expense. If you put yourself down often and well enough, people will begin to start believing what you say
- So if you need to lighten a tense moment, poke fun at the situation, not yourself

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## **KIVA The Healing Power of Laughter**

- The other side of that coin is teasing others. Cutting someone else down in public, raises you up – and men are very good at this
- Generally speaking, they are working from the premise that teasing is an equalizer that helps to develop trust
- Although women deplore this activity, many are learning to take teasing in stride by reframing a verbal jab as a signal that they are being accepted as one of the gang

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## **KIVA The Healing Power of Laughter**

- Men can reframe by recognizing that their remarks might be taken literally and cause offense, even if none is intended
- Thus, they are well-advised to avoid teasing unless they are acquainted enough with a female colleague to know she will take their remarks in good humor

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## **KIVA Emotions at Work**

- Although people are overworked and exhausted, they are encouraged to keep their emotions under wraps
- Of course, this is impossible – like it or not, emotions happen
- Moreover, between men and women, emotion expressiveness, or the lack of it, causes problems of its own

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## Emotions at Work

- Because men traditionally have been taught to suppress all sentiments except anger, many of them are out of touch with their own feelings as well as the feelings of others
- As a result, while they may actually feel fear, hurt, guilt, disappointment, or embarrassment, they express it as anger – the only reaction with which they are comfortable

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## Emotions at Work

- As a result, women find themselves surrounded by male coworkers who are often either inexpressive or angry and who trespass unwittingly on the feelings of others
- At the same time, men consider themselves surrounded by overemotional women who perpetually ask, "What's the matter?" when they would rather be left alone

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## Emotions at Work

- Empathy means acknowledging what other people are feeling and trying to understand why they feel the way they do
- Women seem able to reflect the emotions of others in this manner, and they often expect a similar kind of understanding from their colleagues
- Men, however, tend to equate empathy with vulnerability, which to them means being weak

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## Emotions at Work

- A solution might be to replace the word "vulnerable" with the word "visible," which indicates a willingness to be "seen" as a human being with human feelings
- They can reframe empathy as a supportive gesture rather than an intrusive one
- And they can add this compassionate stance to their repertoire of behaviors so they are able to empathize when a colleague needs it

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## Emotions at Work

- The phrase, "I'm sorry" also causes a lot of confusion
- When women say "I'm sorry," they are indicating one of two things: They are empathizing (which is most frequently the case), or they are sincerely apologizing for making a mistake

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## Emotions at Work

- Men, rarely apologize because to them an apology means "I blew it; I'm taking responsibility."
- When they do apologize, they often do so in a way that suggests "let's get this annoying ritual over with," which is a far cry from sincere contrition

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## Emotions at Work

- To reclaim the phrase, women can use it less often, but only after thinking about what they really mean and then clarifying their intent: "I'm sorry you're upset" or "I'm sorry I screwed up."
- Men can reframe it as a strength and try using it more often to admit a mistake and to say it like they really mean it

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- Although people are continually negotiating throughout their lives, at home and at work, this does not mean they do so happily, that they are good at it, or that they are always completely satisfied with the outcome
- Moreover, when gender enters the picture, the complications increase because men and women bring different strengths and styles to the negotiating table

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- Negotiations have a basic shape that can be separated into four stages: preparation, exploration, proposal, and agreement
- The most important part of any negotiation takes place in the preparation stage, where it is important to research the issues and one's opponents as carefully as possible
- Although preparation serves everyone well, women are generally more willing to do it than men

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- Good listening, necessary throughout a negotiation, is crucial in the exploration and proposal stages
- Here again, women tend to be more skilled in this area
- A man's knowledge of playing the game can be an especially valuable asset in the proposal and agreement stages, but the skill doubles in value when it is taught to others

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- In fact, in a negotiation situation, information from any source is not to be summarily dismissed
- Although everyone has an intuitive sense, women (in American culture) have been allowed to develop this sensibility more than men
- Negotiating teams can and should profit from this well-developed gut instinct

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- Whether you are a man or a woman, if you enter into negotiations believing in the process, you increase your chances of a successful outcome
- It is a matter of wanting to build a bridge rather than wanting to win at all costs or feeling that you haven't got a chance

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## Negotiating for Your Life

- An excellent way to begin this attitude adjustment is to reframe your “opponent” as an individual holding a view that in some way opposes your own, not as an adversary going for the jugular
- With that outlook, you will be able to tailor your own behavior to the circumstances, use all your skill, deal with whatever tactics your opponent tries, and persistently work toward an acceptable outcome

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## The Impact of Nonverbal Messages

- Though you may not be speaking, you still send messages with your facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, rate of speech, volume and tone of voice, manipulation of space, and type of dress
- Not only may you be unaware of these messages, what you transmit and what other people receive do not necessarily coincide
- Moreover, we respond unconsciously to nonverbal messages as well as receive them

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## The Impact of Nonverbal Messages

- Although many nonverbal signals are universal, women and men differ in several of the signals they use and in how these should be interpreted
- Women also tend to be more aware of them than are men, causing women to sometimes overestimate their impact and men to overlook it

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## The Impact of Nonverbal Messages

- The art of decoding nonverbal messages involves noticing and dealing with them at a conscious level
- The first step is to examine your perception in the context of other nonverbal signals and the total situation
- Second, bring the signal up and out. In other words, explain what your signal signifies or does not signify, or ask what a received signal means
- In this way, you can effectively encourage cross-gender understanding

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## Endnotes

Rudman, Carol, Ph.D, Frames of Reference, *How Men and Women Can Overcome Communication Barriers – and Increase Their Effectiveness at Work*. 1996 Peterson's/Pacesetter Books

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