

Gender at Work

Karen Curnow McCluskey

John was commonly viewed as overly sensitive to what some in his office considered “women’s issues,” spending what appeared to be inordinate time during his coffee breaks talking about child rearing and his art and music hobbies. It was no surprise to many of his coworkers that he had been passed over for promotion once again.

Sarah felt frustrated in her new job—having spoken up in meetings, only to have her ideas attributed to her male colleagues, who repeated her positions. Although frustrated, she now understood that she needed to “lie low” if she was going to move ahead.

The Dilemma

Despite the popular debate over gender differences, a degree of awkwardness still predominates in discussions on this topic. How can you bridge the “gender gap” while ensuring an environment respectful of individuals’ unique differences? The goal in looking at gender issues is twofold: (1) to raise awareness about the differences that exist and their origins (possibly reducing misperceptions in the process); and (2) to give people approaches and techniques to keep them out of hot water and keep them

**A New Model
Acknowledges
The Impact of
Socialization
On All Men and
Women While
Recognizing
Individual
Uniqueness**

communicating more effectively when they are interacting with men and women at work.

Supporting this twofold goal is a strong belief that, to increase productivity and effectiveness at work, men and women must understand one another, communicate honestly and respectfully, and manage conflict in a way that maintains the relationship and gets the job done. The goal is to become more productive *because we are different*. To improve relationships and interactions between men and women, we must acknowledge the differences that do exist, understand how they develop, and discard dogma about what are the “right” roles of women and men. Then, we can replace misperceptions and assumptions with a sensible understanding of the evolving roles of men and women in our culture.

Socialization Strongly Influences Gender Communication

Have we been socialized to behave in the ways we do, or are our behaviors inborn, genetically determined? Many have debated and researched this issue, with contradictory results.

In her 1994 presentation for an Authors’ Night at the Freedom Forum, author Judy Mann explains that she interviewed hundreds of women—anthropologists, biologists, brain researchers, psychologists, educators, historians, and theologians—for her research on gender differences in America. While Mann, who wrote *The Difference: Growing Up Female in America*, admits that there still is a lot that we don’t know, there are a few things on which the experts do agree. They know that the biggest difference between males and females is in their reproductive systems, and that boys tend to be taller and to have more upper-body strength than girls. Studies that try to prove other biological or inborn trait differences are less convincing and subject to criticism, according to Mann.

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She adds, “Most experts now believe that what happens to boys and girls is a complex interaction between slight biological differences and tremendously powerful social forces that begin to manifest themselves the minute the parents find out whether they are going to have a boy or a girl.” In talking about the impact of parenting and societal pressures, Mann draws a distinction between the achievement orientation encouraged in boys and the affiliation orientation encouraged in girls. Mann asserts that “we raise our sons to succeed; we raise our daughters to be happy.”

Dr. Patricia Heim, consultant and author of such books as *Hardball for Women*, *Smashing the Glass Ceiling*, *Learning to Lead*, and *The Power Dead-Even Rule*, agrees that societal pressures have a strong impact on male and female behaviors and perceptions. Heim contends that men and women behave and communicate differently because they are raised in two separate gender

cultures. She demonstrates her theory by providing examples from early infancy, when parents hold and play with their girls and boys differently; through school years, during which, studies have shown convincingly, boys get significantly more attention and encouragement for achievement from parents and teachers than do girls; and into adulthood and the workplace, where men and women who do not fit the stereotypical behavior patterns of their “gender culture” risk being negatively labeled and perhaps overlooked for promotions and plum assignments.

Deborah Tannen, in her many books on the topic (*You Just Don’t Understand*, *That’s Not What I Meant!*, and *Talking from 9 to 5*), agrees with the concept that men and women tend to have two different, gender-linked cultures in which they grow up. In *Talking from 9 to 5*, Tannen comments that male-female communication is really cross-cultural communication because “we learn styles of interacting as children growing up, and . . . children tend to play in sex-separate groups in which very different styles are learned, practiced, and reinforced . . .”

Author and consultant George Simons calls the male-female dimension the “ultimate cross-cultural difference” and explains that the difficulties in communication between men and women often stem from language barriers emerging from their culturally linked patterns of talking.

It’s Not Just Gender, and It’s Not So Simple

Life is complex. Individuals’ communication styles are not simply based on whether they are men or women. Some writers would have us believe that all men think and behave in certain ways and that all women think and behave in different ways. This simplistic and dichotomous approach to describing men and women (who in reality have many layers of differences in many dimensions) has at best created an unrealistic simplicity out of a complex world and at

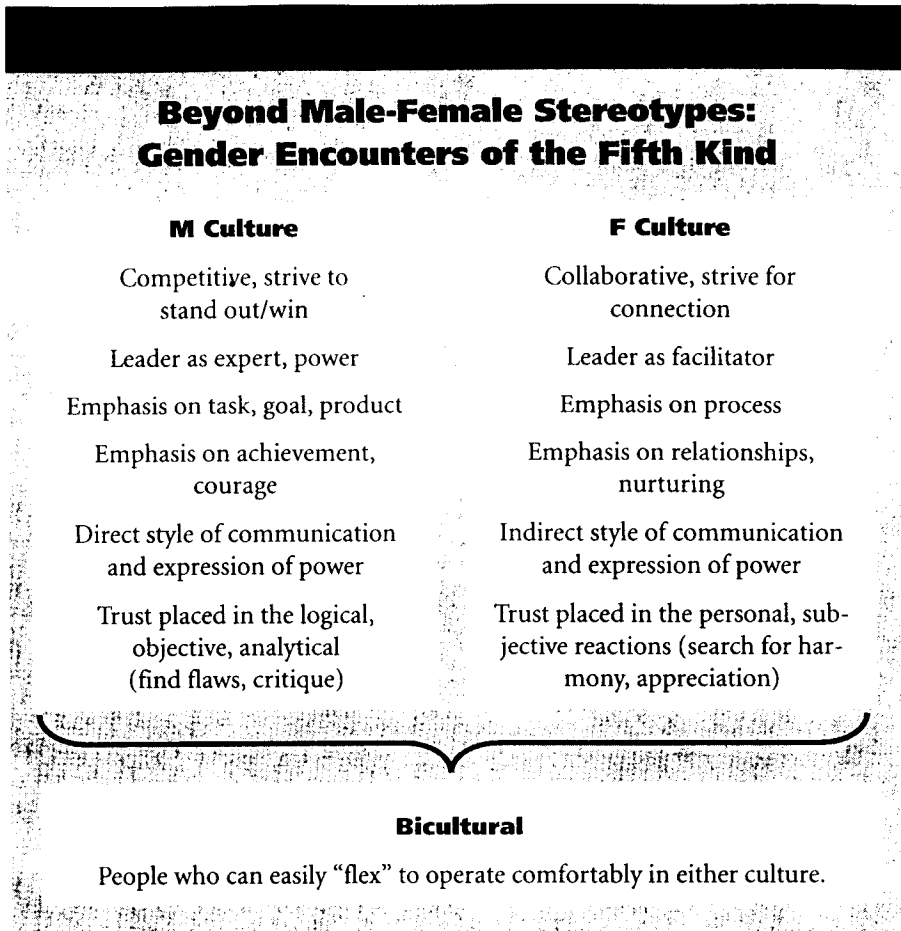
worst reinforced traditional stereotypes that many individuals believe are inaccurate or in flux. When thinking of how to improve our communications with men and women, we need to think beyond just gender.

No formula will work with all women and with all men in all situations. Like so much of life, communicating effectively with others starts with an understanding of who they are as individuals.

Elinor Spieler, diversity consultant and creator of the model *Beyond Male-Female Stereotypes*, asserts, "This work is about complexity, not about simplistic explanations. I see some of the popular models, and while I think they resonate with many people, I also think they're making some people feel they are stuck in a stereotype." Rather than improving relationships and communication, assigning rigid male and female roles in communication is causing increased polarization.

Other writers on this topic also are quick to emphasize that distinctions by gender culture represent only one factor to consider in trying to improve communication with another person. As Tannen comments, "... Gender is only one of many influences on conversational style. Each individual has a unique style, influenced by a personal history of many influences such as geographic region, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, occupation, religion, and age—as well as a unique personality and spirit ..."

This complexity can be seen in many examples. Diversity consultant Tuan Pham demonstrates how the combination of gender, generation, and national culture affects his Vietnamese community. "The baby boom generation or older," Pham comments, "[have] ingrained [in them] an old notion that ... male and female adolescents ought to be kept separate. Today, with more and more Asian women joining the ranks of business and professional executives, communication channels between men and women have opened up; however, the barriers remain high. Asian women generally do not talk with men they don't



know, even about the weather. Those who do, risk being seen as lustful ..."

Pham goes on to comment that Asian Americans who grow up in the United States do not feel these cultural constraints as strongly but often do have a tendency to show restraints in front of their elders, out of respect. This strong cultural heritage and its resulting behaviors have implications for the workplace. And this example shows how the complexity of cultural expectations strongly influences gender-linked behaviors.

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A New Approach: Developing Cultural Mediators

Elinor Spieler is one of the diversity consultants who are trying to combat the oversimplification and the reinforcing of

stereotypes described above. She offers a promising new model, one that acknowledges the impact of socialization on all men and women while at the same time permitting the recognition of individual uniqueness.

Her model, *Beyond Male-Female Stereotypes: Gender Encounters of the Fifth Kind*, describes the two different gender cultures that have emerged in the works of many others as an "M Culture" and an "F Culture." Spieler explains, "Instead of attributing behaviors to gender, I attribute behaviors to a cultural style. One of the differences between culture and sex or gender is that sex is inborn. Culture is learned. So while I acknowledge that there may be biological ... roots to the different styles that men and women have been described to have, I think biology is only a piece. ... [In describing the different components of my model], I prefer to refer to M and F Cultures, not eliminating the association to males and females completely but cutting [the direct link]."

Spieler has created composite de-

scriptions of the gender differences identified by other writers and researchers on the topic. She describes people comfortable in an M Culture (see box on page 7) as those who relate to others competitively, by striving to win. M Culture people also prefer direct communication and value achievement over relationships. People comfortable in the M Culture may be seen as problem solvers who use critical analysis as a way to make decisions and resolve issues.

People more comfortable in the F Culture, on the other hand, tend to relate to others collaboratively, by striving for connection. They tend to emphasize relationships and process and to be more indirect in communicating their preferences. F Culture people also are at ease in showing empathy and expressing appreciation.

What separates the *Beyond Male-Female Stereotypes* model from many others is Spieler's explanation that a man or a woman may be more comfortable in either culture. Her model identifies five kinds of individuals:

- Men more comfortable operating in an M Culture.
- Women more comfortable operating in an M Culture.
- Men more comfortable operating in an F Culture.
- Women more comfortable operating in an F Culture.
- Bicultural people, who are equally comfortable in either culture.

People who are more comfortable in the culture traditionally associated with their gender (M Culture for men, F Culture for women) may face fewer labels and judgments from others than do those who are more comfortable operating in the opposite culture (M Culture for women, F Culture for men).

The heart of the *Beyond Male-Female Stereotypes* model is the bicultural individual, who has learned how to operate with equal comfort in either culture. These cultural mediators, by changing approaches or behaviors and by ap-

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proaching both cultures with respect and acceptance, can "flex" from one culture to the other with ease. Spieler comments, "I'm interested in identifying and supporting cultural mediators, bicultural people. I think most people can find a piece of the cultural mediator inside themselves and need to develop that aspect [to succeed in the workplace today]."

So, how do we develop the bicultural aspects of ourselves and become stronger cultural mediators? How do we improve our communications with both men and women in the workplace? What can we learn from these cultural mediators? Following are some suggestions for awareness, skills, and approaches that are needed to communicate well across any dimension of difference, including gender differences.

Approaches That Work

Here are some methods of looking inward, examining ourselves and looking outward, checking how we interact with others.

Looking Inward: Personal Reevaluation

Become self-aware. Acknowledge stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions. Some of the biggest problems in communicating across gender (or any

other gaps) emerge from and at times erupt because of the assumptions that affect our decisions, behaviors, and approaches to other people. Becoming self-aware is one of the toughest first steps toward improving communications. One way to become self-aware is, first, to identify unsuccessful situations in which we have operated from assumptions rather than from specific knowledge about another person, then, to identify better approaches to take.

Don't try to create others in your image. Know that other preferences exist and are equally valid.

We need to move dramatically away from the belief that there is one best way to communicate. It is easy to relinquish our responsibility in the communication process by blaming or saying, "This person obviously cannot communicate well," rather than by asking for clarification or simply accepting the different style as just that—different, not deficient. Not seeing style differences for what they are, people often draw conclusions about personality ("you're illogical") or intentions ("you're out to get me") or abilities ("you're incompetent"). Instead of jumping to judgment when faced with people different from you, assume that what they are saying is true and valid from their perspective, and try to understand that perspective better.

Be sincerely curious and respectful about any differences that exist.

Operate from a foundation of trust and respect for other people's opinions, feelings, and perceptions. Fuel your curiosity by recognizing that you will be both more enriched personally and more productive professionally if you gain a better understanding of the styles and perspectives of all staff.

Take into account the impact of other dimensions of diversity,

both in yourself and in the person with whom you are communicating. Don't oversimplify or explain away

simplistically the problems or confusion you may feel.

Looking Outward: Interpersonal Efforts and Approaches

Be better observers. It is critical that we all become better observers of the cues (verbal and nonverbal) that we get in communicating with others. There's an old saying: "We have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth so that we might see and hear more and talk less."

Act like Columbo. Heims recommends that people act like the television detective Columbo by saying, "I'm confused. What are you recommending/asking/telling?" Discipline yourself to ask more questions, instead of making decisions based on assumptions.

Become intolerant of name calling. Though a preoccupation with perfect, politically correct word choice is counterproductive, we need to try to use language that does not demean, exclude, or offend others. We still may offend by accident, but if our intention is positive, our chances of creating better understanding between ourselves and others is greatly enhanced.

Talk about the differences. Begin the work of dialogue. Bring issues to the table. If your intention is positive and if a foundation of trust exists, the dialogue on differences alone will help you communicate and work better together. Ask nonjudgmental questions to get clarifications of confusing issues or behaviors.

Network with a wide variety of people, including men and women comfortable in both the M and the F Cultures, to develop a greater breadth and depth of understanding of the different perspectives that exist.


Be more concerned with how you say things. In the film *Working Together: Managing Cultural Diversity*, Odette Pollar, author and consultant on

diversity issues, comments, "When all else fails, ask: 'This is what I'd like to do. How does that come across to you?' Often, it is as much *how* we say something as *what* we say."

Don't walk on eggshells, and don't be thin-skinned. Be wary of boxing yourself in, of becoming so careful about what you say that you never attempt to bridge communication gaps. There's nothing more distancing for relationships than everyone trying hard to be politically correct, instead of everyone trying hard to build relationships. Be aware of your own red flags, or triggers that set you off. If you hear something that you believe is offensive, ask yourself if the remark was delivered with a negative intent. Assume a positive intent unless it is proven otherwise.

Keep your sense of humor. A healthy sense of humor can have a wonderful impact on a work setting. If your goal is to create and maintain an environment of trust, cooperation, and team spirit, one of the most effective tools you can use is humor. An ability to laugh together—not *at* one another but *with* one another—about the differences can communicate respect and a real acceptance of the differences, even when we do not understand them.

To improve our communications with men and women at work, we need to depend less on stereotypes; to determine the gender culture in which we and our coworkers feel more

comfortable (whether male or female); and to use strategies that are based on open recognition and understanding of our unique differences. We have a responsibility to create an environment that is based on mutual respect and that enables us to celebrate and appreciate our differences. It is not just the right thing to do; it is a business imperative that will directly affect the bottom line. 

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To be included in ongoing research supporting the Beyond Male-Female Stereotypes: Gender Encounters of the Fifth Kind model, contact Karen Curnow McCluskey at Compass International, 703/757-0060.

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