

Communication Skills For Women In The World Of Corporate Business: Getting It Right And Moving Up!

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ABSTRACT

This article explores, in general, three areas for leadership communication that women in business need to master. Indeed, there are more than three, but the focus here is on: the need to master the art of successfully confronting the problem when it appears, the process of leading a team, the special requirements of communicating with men. An exploration of these three areas shows that the vital and often missing link is opportunity for females to practice and feedback from male mentors and counterparts. The report also lists the top 10 strategies that women need in order to be perceived as successful leaders and communicators.

Keywords: Search: communication skills for women, women in business, team work, communicating with men, confronting workplace problems

INTRODUCTION

Communication Skills for Women are the most talked about skills and yet the most seldom really taught skills. And when the skills are taught, the teaching targets the neocortex part of the brain which involves just rote memory, as opposed to the limbic part of the brain which is where emotional intelligence develops. This most important of all skills required to get your ideas across, resolve conflicts, shine in meetings, persuade and influence others, and rise in the ranks of any corporation is not taught to that part of the brain that needs feedback and practice. Women and men sit in endless courses and read countless text on communication, but this is not the way communication is learned. The skill of communication is learned with feedback and practice. Men get this feedback; women do not.

For women to benefit from communication training, they must find mentors who provide feedback and seek opportunities to practice the skill of leadership communication. Another and equally essential requirement for the development of these skills is called out by Malcolm Gladwell in his new book *The Outliers* when he talks about the 10,000 hour rule for success. The point is that people who are successful have practiced what they are successful at for at least 10,000 hours. This message is to be taken seriously by any woman who aspires to leadership. It is also the reason we do not have more women in power positions; they do not have the opportunity to practice, either because they are held waiting by the all male power force or because they drop out to have children or run their own business and eschew the leadership positions of power.

No doubt about it...professional women who communicate effectively and confidently go further faster in their careers than those who do not. Today, more than ever, top-notch communication skills are an absolute must if a woman is to get ahead professionally. Be advised, this message is primarily addressed to women, but much of the same applies to men as well.

This article looks at three areas of leadership communication for women: the need to master the art of successfully confronting the problem when it appears, the process of leading a team, the special requirements of communicating with men.

COMMUNICATION FOR CONFRONTING THE PROBLEM

Effective women leaders confront problems at first evidence. Ineffective leaders look the other way, hoping the problems will be self-correcting. They rarely are. Failing to address issues head-on exacerbates the problem, allowing it to fester, creating gossip and low morale throughout an organization.

Some of the ways to know when and how to confront involve taking everything that involves employees seriously. When an employee is concerned, it is important and the leader should address it at the same level of importance as the employee is experiencing it. Bill Clinton will be remembered for many things and one of the things most memorable is when he told his audiences: "I feel your pain." He did this with strong body language and his hands touching his chest. He is also the master of eye contact. Females often shoulder surf when someone is taking to them. When another person is speaking to you, it is critical that you focus on that person and then respond with real empathy and understanding. Never ignore a problem. If it is a problem in the organization or with an employee, it is a problem.

Another important rule is not to exaggerate a problem or over talk the problem. You must have categories for the problems and a time strategy that matches the problem. After you acknowledge the problem with the organization or employee, set a time when you can respond with knowledge of the situation. This has to be a short time because of the level of expectation created by the demands of current communication systems. Our entire world is in live time, and women must create a communication style to match the current level of expectation.

Never shoot from the hip! Many women adopt this style, but it can be damning to any leader. It is one thing to be quick to respond, but another to be impulsive. You need to call on the resources which allow you to always do your homework. Know yourself here, and if you tend to respond too quickly because you are responding to pressure or because you want to appear smart and capable, create and hold on to a more studied style of response. This behavior is most likely something that is practiced and practiced. Again, this pattern highlights the 10,000 hour rule.

COMMUNICATION FOR TEAM LEADERSHIP

As professional women take on the task of leading teams, they will also have to master a pattern for team leadership. Women often vacillate in making decisions because they fear hurt feelings or they are fearful of making a wrong decision. They do all the work without delegating (because it is easier), and by the time they do have the discussion about everyone's roles, they are so tired and disgusted there is little or no diplomacy in their message.

To be impressive, professional women must understand their role in delegation.

You do not have to prove yourself or your value by doing it all by yourself. This is almost the tragic flaw for women communicators and leaders. The same goes for decision-making which is the core of team leadership. The best team leaders with strong communication skills develop a team consensus to make decisions. This is both an art and a science. It is a skill that can be taught and improved with practice.

When working with teams, it is important for morale and motivation to involve team members. Decision-making can be discussed from five approaches. The requisite skill is knowing when to apply what approach:

- 1) The leader makes the decision; no input from the team.
- 2) The leader makes the decision, but asks team members for information on which to base the decision.
- 3) The leader makes the decision, but the team members help evaluate the information and provide input. The leader then makes the final decision.
- 4) The leader has the entire team participate in providing information and help in the evaluation of the options. The leader then makes the final decision.
- 5) The leader turns the decision over to the team and accepts whatever decision is made.

Great leaders know when to apply which strategy in a way that reinforces the team concept, nurtures morale, develops people, and gets great results.

Delegation: One of the most challenging parts of being a team leader is knowing when and how to delegate. Professional women often believe they have to prove their value by doing it all themselves; however, their real value is in creating greater productivity by engaging others in the process. When working with teams, it is important to get everyone involved. All team members should be assigned a role with responsibilities, accountabilities, and deadlines. Delegation is not abdication. The responsibility for what is being delegated remains with the person doing the delegating.

Many leaders have trouble delegating because of trust issues, either with the specific person to whom they are delegating or in general. Women have trust issues, no doubt. We would rather over work ourselves in the extreme than allow the project to fail. In either scenario, an initial discussion must include specificity around expectations and accountabilities to deadlines. Additionally, the discussion must also include feedback as to the comfort level in accomplishing the delegated assignment and a request to understand the amount of oversight, coaching, and feedback required.

Diplomacy: Conjures up images of a powerful, respectful communicator negotiating important international treaties and alliances. This can be true, however, like negotiating the expectations and emotions of individuals on teams are the core issue. Diplomacy always comes down to communication. It is a special style of communication that influences others in a positive manner, building trust and respect that gets incredible results. Today, far too little communication from leaders is specific enough to set clear expectations that can thus be met by the team member. Thus, the element of expectation remains different for both the follower and the leader. Women specifically tend to talk in euphuism and have difficulty being specific. It often leaves teams without the guidance they need to accomplish the task. This is because female leaders tend to see big pictures and end games and do not focus on the details that teams require for action.

Mastering the Communicating Styles necessary for Team Leadership allows professional women business leaders to create and lead championship teams that give them the respect and reputation necessary to move up through the organization to higher levels of leadership. If professional women focus on effective delegation, they will usually save themselves time...be better team leaders...increase the quality of the team's results...and raise the overall morale.

COMMUNICATION WITH MEN

Communicating with power and finesse is a skill that does not come naturally to most women. I believe you know what I mean. For example, when a woman is drowned out at an important meeting by men with louder voices...Or you have an excellent idea that gets dismissed and then 10 minutes later, a man suggests the exact same thing and everyone is suddenly all for it. Or when you are speaking to someone up the chain of command and he acts like you're invisible. This can be frustrating!

Several years ago, a survey of women in fortune 500 companies at the VP level or higher...were asked to describe the behaviors that led them to their success. The number one answer at 71 %...was "exceeding expectations." The number two answer at 67 %...was "communicating with men in a manner in which men were comfortable." (Beshara, 2006)

No doubt about it...Professionals who communicate effectively and confidently go much further faster in their careers than those who do not. Today, more than ever, top-notch communication skills are an absolute if you as a woman want to get ahead professionally.

Know the big picture and succeed: Since the late '60s, as an outgrowth of the racial equality movement, there has been increased emphasis on the equality of women. In spite of this, the fact is...women in the workplace are affected by their inability to change jobs and "climb" the corporate ladder.

Wage Earning-Fact from the Department of Labor Statistics: When women begin their careers out of college or graduate school, they earn about as much as men do. From ages 25 to 29, women earn 90 percent of what their male counterparts earn. But that all changes when they become mothers... and by the time they are 44 years old, their wages are down to 71 percent of what their male counterparts earn. The prime years for having children are also prime years for establishing a career. This is such an important fact for any discussion on leadership skills for women. The communication skills needed to raise a family and run a home are not the skills needed to climb the corporate ladder and assume a leadership role within a corporation. The time women take for child bearing is time they never get back. Nor should they ask for it back. It is a choice both women and men must make in terms of family and lifestyle.

Consider these statistics: Half of the women from the graduating class of Stanford in 1981 left the workforce by 1998 and one out of every three MBA-earning women of the same class were not working full-time jobs at that time. In comparison, only one out of every 22 male MBAs of the same class was not working full-time in 1998. 43 % of women with children quit working sometime during their career, even though 97 percent of these women had planned to return to salaried work. (Steen, 2007)

In one study, women who quit the work force for 1-2 years lost nearly one-third of their earning power in that time. The Center of Work Life Policy studied 2,443 women in business in separate groups. 37 % of those studied quit work sometime during their career. That figure rose to 43 % if they had children. 25% of these women who left their jobs were not able to get rehired. Of the 74 % who were successful in finding new jobs, only 40 percent were hired in a full-time professional position.

Performance Factors: Women do not suffer from the "big male ego" problem. This problem is created by the natural competitiveness of the male psyche. Very often, in business as well as in sports, the male ego gets in the way of performance. It is the veiled threat that you need "to be careful with me or I'll beat you up!"

Most often, this "big male ego" syndrome creates an environment where the person's "game" is nowhere near as big as his ego. In other words, the male's performance is often not as good as his ego would lead others to believe. This is not to say that women do not have healthy or competitive egos; they do. For the most part, however, women seem more capable of bypassing this, "I'm bigger than you...my dad can beat up your dad ... I'll kick your butt," ego game that men play and women move on to concentrating on performance.

Women can be just as competitive as men, but they don't have the same kind of male ego challenge. They do not automatically bruise other people's egos when they are out performed.

Since the business environment is still a "man's" world, women have to work harder to attain the same levels of recognition. When women, like most minorities, want to reach equality, they have to work harder and perform better than the average employee. So, when over achievement is expected, average achievement is perceived as underachievement. It is not uncommon, therefore, for a female professional to be either recognized as a stellar performer or criticized as a poor performer. She is rarely perceived as average. As an over performer, she has to really outperform most of her male counterparts. Average performance or less will be perceived as underperformance, and over performance, which is required, ironically may cause the males to be over challenged. This is when special communication skill is required to remain self-promotional and yet not intimidating.

The major disadvantages that women face in getting hired and promoted all stem from the "mommy track" possibility. Hiring a female of childbearing age poses risks to an employer. These will never be voiced, but the challenge is always present, even in the most forward and progressive companies. Many women, as stated, claim they will return to work after childbirth, but do not. This is a major resource challenge for any employer.

The challenges of being a practicing business professional and a mother...until children are grown, present a real and tangible barrier to careers for women. Rearing children is the hardest calling in the world. It makes most business endeavors look simple. Motherhood is more than an "occupation." A mother's concern for her child or children will almost always supersede her concern for her career. This poses a real challenge for hiring organizations. On one hand, hiring authorities want a professional who has their priorities in order. On the other, when those personal priorities run the risk of being an expense to the company, the companies have a real dilemma.

One piece of advice, keep your family matters at home. If you have children, do not put pictures on the shelves of your office. For men, this is strength and says they are good providers and faithful to their charge. For women, it says I need to leave early to pick up the children. I do not like this difference, but it is real. When you talk about families always speak positively and talk about success. Any problem you mention makes you look too responsible to the family and less accessible to the corporation.

PREPARING FOR A CAREER AS A LEADER

Although there have been many advances since the 1960s, there are still many to overcome. As a woman, you are not alone. Today with widespread knowledge and increased awareness, there are more organizations, resources, role models, and services to help professional women who are on-ramping in career movement and coaching which helps us to work smarter and more effectively than ever before.

Consider your personal preferences in how you acquire information. With the myriad of advice and information available on every type of media and support groups and services available in nearly every community, and even online, there is sure to be some option that would be a fit for you.

How does a professional woman acquire happiness and accept at the same time leadership. It comes from the inside out! Look happy...smile a lot...think about being very much alive!

Many people believe that outside objects or events will make them happy; however, happiness comes from within. The same concept holds true for leadership. Take as many courses as you would like...take as much training and coaching as you can digest, but if leadership does not come from within...your followers will know it. Why? People will follow you as a leader...because they will believe you stand by what you believe. And they will be loyal to you...because they admire you and want to follow you.

Lessons to Remember:

SMILE: Whether you are talking with a friend, family member, your children, your boss, your employees or someone on the phone, remember to keep a smile on your face.

KNOW THYSELF: If you see yourself putting too much energy on outside "sources" that "will make you happy...or not," whether it is a new house, outfit, car, jewelry, face or body, think again. If you are not feeling well, these external gifts will not make you happier. Focus on finding that "inside happiness first" and then reward yourself.

KEEP A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ABOUT THE FUTURE: You may be experiencing hard times, but you can avoid perpetuating them. Bring about positive thoughts of how you will overcome the obstacles and keep an eye on the future.

SHARE YOUR JOY WITH OTHERS: Being in a great mood is infectious and is key to a happy household, workplace and organization. Children are ready to adapt to their parents' moods just as employees are ready to adapt to their bosses' moods. Therefore, as the home queen, entrepreneur, or corporate warrior, your great disposition will bring out the best in others as they tune-in and match your own vibration.

TAKE GREAT CARE OF YOURSELF: Your integrated health and wellness in the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social dimensions are key to experience the ultimate power of well-being and thus successful leadership.

CONCLUSION

A lack of knowledge, awareness, and training to develop your communications skills can damage your career! Most people would agree with that statement and it is basic advice to polish the skills that will ensure your success.

Many women have heard the complaint from our colleagues or personally expressed this sentiment, "I trained hard for my job, but all I seem to do is try to fix people problems." These kinds of people skills are what we mean by communication skills. Often, they are the very skills we didn't learn! The subtle things no one tells us. Since we are born with a distinct and different personality and develop a communication pattern based on our family culture, we often believe because we are successful in our original unit that we have the skills for our life

work. Like walking, it just happens. However, like power walking differs from strolling around the mall, business communication is not at all like chatting with a friend over coffee.

Women are especially vulnerable to presenting a distorted image of who they really are through their communication style. The very attributes that enable a woman to work well with others, build relationships, seek consensus, empathize, and persuade may work in a negative manner as a woman climbs the corporate ladder. Many senior managers are still very much controlled by the old, white-male establishment. This establishment expects everyone to think and communicate like they think and communicate; they become uncomfortable when the communicator is female, just because they are female. This is unfortunate, unfair and unacceptable but must be recognized as the beginning for the playing field.

Finding ways to communicate effectively, while maintaining your unique strengths as a woman in business is a skill you must learn and develop. As with all skills, it takes time and practice. But the first step, as always when we face a new challenge, is to recognize our need, assess our strengths and begin working on the areas where we need to grow the most first.

Despite the shift into the 21st century, we probably will continue to be hampered by the past for some time to come. Women have made great advances in the workplace, but many areas remain to be conquered. Girls are still taught differently from boys. Passive, manipulative, deferential and nurturing styles of behavior are considered appropriate for girls; aggressive, competitive, boastful and demanding styles are permitted for boys. Girls tend to play in small groups, suggesting activities and taking turns. Boys play in larger groups, impose rules and follow leaders' orders. They compete, valuing winning and wanting to be best.

Men are still viewed as doing valuable, paid work. Women are still seen as caregivers whose work is not paid for and therefore not valuable. These attitudes will not vanish overnight although they are gradually softening and will eventually change. You might feel angry and frustrated about it, but the fact remains and must be faced.

The task for women in business today is to recognize their self-worth, value their skills and do not give away their gifts and build on the skills they have and access the training for the skills they do not have. Undervaluing the strengths women possess and trying to become something other than what we are (i.e. women and not a man in women's clothes) will not make us more accepted. A quick look at the outlined differences in the early imprinting for boys and girls in the last few paragraphs shows that many of the things that little girls do as they play closely reflect the consensual style of today's business environment, especially in middle management. This may explain why there are more female than male middle managers in American companies today.

Top 10 Strategies for Women for Successful Communication Leadership:

- Dress conservatively and have a clothing consultant (not your partner)
- Wear Suits and keep your jacket on (master the clothes, hair, shoes)
- *Expect* to be treated equally in the office and then walk down the street to the local watering hole but do not *expect* the male to pick up the tab (use this rule in all scenarios)
- Do not gossip, pay attention to the grapevine
- Find a mentor, a male who respects women
- Be on Time, always; do your homework
- Learn to Kibitz and talk about something other than business, i.e. sports, weather, local politics (never children, spouse, mother, father) No pictures of children in office
- Use your sex to advance your strengths and not to threaten or intimidate a male colleague
- Portray a healthy life style in dress, conversation, deportment
- Have a mantra that you repeat every day that gives clarity to your mission

These are subjects for our ongoing research and writing. Please e-mail any observation and responses: pberry1@ju.edu or visit the website @ <http://users.ju.edu/pberry1>

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NOTES