

# different is different work it

## GENDER ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE

BY TRISH BROCK

There are two kinds of people in this world - men and women. And regardless of which kind you are, if you manage, lead or sell to them all in the same way, you are only going to get it right 50 percent of the time.

Addressing gender differences is about as safe as bringing up sex, religion or

politics at a dinner party. We certainly have our opinions. And what makes this particularly prickly is that we have all experienced the mystifying differences and heard (and often laughed at) the jokes. And true to most generalizations, there are always exceptions.

In a business environment, be it management or sales, it is to everyone's

benefit to have a heightened awareness of why the other gender behaves the way they do. How many employees have been lost, company morale jeopardized and sales opportunities missed because of misinterpretations or misunderstandings?

It's tempting to take a defensive stance, seeing the other as inferior, and to make a value judgment, i.e. right/wrong, good/bad, better/worse, effective/non-effective. This doesn't accomplish much. Different means different. Expecting one gender to do and think like the other

will be about as successful as trying to change a cat into a dog. But when differences are understood and validated, misunderstandings can be minimized often resulting in more effective meetings, presentations, increased sales and improved office morale. Enlightened employers and savvy sales people intuitively know that they must adjust their behavior to be more effective more of the time.

Dr. Pat Heim, a leading researcher, author and advisor on gender differences suggests that there are inherent cultural differences in the values and needs of each gender. Not unlike comparing shaking hands to bowing - they both get the job done, but can look pretty weird when you are accustomed to doing one and see the other for the first time. Consider:

**1** Both men and women may nod their heads during a meeting or sales presentation but cross-gender confusion will reign if these nods are not understood. Women tend to nod their heads during a conversation or presentation as if to say "I hear you, interesting, keep going..." This gesture doesn't necessarily mean they agree with what is being said, only that they are engaged and considering the information. Often however, men mistakenly read this as acceptance.

Men, on the other hand, usually listen with few, if any, gestures and will nod



their head only when they are in agreement. If a woman is talking (or presenting) and her male colleague is not nodding, she may perceive him as being inattentive or possibly even in dispute of her point of view.

When communicating with the opposite sex in any business environment, be aware of this non-verbal cue. It's easy to see how quickly a sales presentation or meeting could get off track.

**2** **Getting to the bottom line** will often take a different course for men and women. Women may choose to involve an interpersonal component when communicating and are not comfortable getting to the punch line until that initial relationship has been established. Men on the other hand, may often skip the interpersonal component because from their point of view, it has little to do with the logical matter at hand. Men too can feel that the preamble women wish to establish to be a waste of time.

Neither way is right or wrong, but the difference in communications styles can prevent a "connection" unless each gender is aware of what the other's needs may be. Women may be pegged as disorganized, confused, chatty and wasting precious work time. Men can be seen as cold, uncaring, impatient and unwilling to listen.

**3** **Companies constantly talk** about the importance of a strong team, being a good team player and how so-and-so isn't a good team member. Companies have team building initiatives, outings and cheer the successes of the team or in some cases, lament the continued failure of their team building efforts. But the very term "teamwork" is what gets in our way because it represents radically different things and ideas to different people.

In her research, Dr. Heim met with a group of men and a group of women and asked each group how they would define teamwork. The men responded that the team needs to follow orders, support

without question the leader and to do whatever it takes for the sake of the team. The women responded that the team needs to share ideas, listen to each other, especially when there is disagreement, and to work collaboratively.

There is no right or wrong definition of team work. This story underscores that, before you attempt to build your team, it's critical to define and clearly communicate how your team should function and be evaluated. What are the rules? Without that, each of your team members will be playing a different game.

**4** **When you see men or women** talking, notice how they position themselves with each other. Men will often stand next to each other, shoulder to shoulder. In a small group, they will nearly line up. Women however, will stand face to face, and in a group will form more of a circle.

Subconsciously, men interpret face to face encounters as aggressive or confrontational. Look at the covers of some sports magazines or political cartoons if you are in doubt. Women, on the other hand, feel more engaged when speaking face to face.

So, knowing this, imagine an encounter in a hallway of male and female colleagues. She faces him directly as they begin their conversation. He turns 90 degrees so that she is essentially talking to his shoulder. She moves slightly to get back to her comfortable face to face position. He shifts again to regain his comfortable shoulder to shoulder position. And what do you suppose each are thinking? She feels like he is blowing her off, and he feels like she is too aggressive!

Suggestion: The next time you stop to chat with someone in the hall, cocktail party, etc., stay put and let the other person find the stance they feel comfortable with.


**5** **Men and women often** approach meetings from radically different perspectives and this can be a source of confusion and annoyance for all.



Men will often have meetings before the meeting. Dr. Heim refers to this as "duck lining up." One man might say to another, "I'm going to bring idea "x" up in tomorrow's meeting. I think idea "x" will be good for the department and what do you think of idea "x?" This same conversation will be repeated to the various intended attendees, hence "lining up his ducks." When the meeting takes place, most everyone is knowledgeable about idea "x" and so there is little discussion (because the meeting has already been held...) and there is already general consensus.

Women go to meetings for the meeting. They come with the intention of reviewing, discussing and evaluating the relative merits of idea "x" and to get the input of the group. They collaborate to build consensus so that they can create the best possible outcome and to be sure the needs of the group are met.

Both ways of conducting meetings work. The problems arise when the "rules" of the meeting aren't understood.

Think of the people you work with and attempt to influence daily, whether you are in a sales position, managing a department or leading an entire organization. Being aware of the different and equally valid behaviors can help banish the blame and confusion, allowing for stronger and more productive working relationships. Celebrate, talk and laugh about these differences. Bridging the differences by understanding them will make everyone's lives a bit less stressful. 

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