**Introduction**

Twenty years ago, a simple change in John Gray's communication style led his counseling practice to jump from half-filled to a long waiting list. When dealing with female clients, he started to spend more time listening and asking questions, instead of offering solutions right away. They were so satisfied that they began enthusiastically recommending him to friends as someone who cared.

In the past, Gray had cared about his clients and had demonstrated that caring by offering quick solutions. Men appreciated that approach, but women didn't. The slight change in his style with women allowed him to convey the support he wanted to give.

Men and women can be very different in their communication styles. Although gender differences are often not as obvious in the workplace as they are in personal relationships, they still exist and can be misunderstood. Indeed, they're often so different, even at work, that it seems as if they're from different planets: men from Mars and women from Venus.

**Speaking Different Languages**

Those differences show up dramatically in the area of communication. Not only are men and women from different planets, speaking different languages, but they often don't realize it. They think they're speaking the same language. Misinterpretation is so common and consistent that it eventually affects their attitudes to each other.

One of the major differences is in the emphasis placed on tasks versus relationships. On Mars, communication is used primarily to solve problems and get tasks done, while on Venus, it's used for other purposes as well. Men focus on conveying content or information in their workplace communication. For women, communication is much more than that - it's a way to solve problems but it's also used to minimize stress, create emotional bonds to strengthen relationships, and as a means to stimulate creativity and discover new ideas.

Many men will quietly mull things over and then get right to the point when they speak. Men who are perceived as competent by other men will generally use the least number of words necessary to make a point. When men do talk a lot, it's in a manner that implies every word is important and necessary to explain their proposed solution. If a man makes several points, he'll try to make each one essential, and he'll present them in a logical sequence to suggest a solution. Men avoid sounding uncertain at all costs. They try to speak confidently, which gains the respect of other men.

Women are just as capable of solving problems, but their communication style may give men the impression that the women doubt their own abilities. In the process of finding or proposing a solution, women tend to be more relationship-oriented - seeking the opinions of others, for example, and not letting the clarity of their own views be evident. By not presuming to have all the answers, women "gather in" the support of others. Their words will convey not only content but feeling as well. But using extra words to make a point can cause women to be viewed as less...
Men at work use language for one reason and women for four reasons. Men use words to convey content to make a point. This kind of communication is limited to facts, figures and logic. Women also use language to make a point, but they use words for three other reasons as well:

- **Talking to give and receive emotional support.** Women use language to convey feelings. A woman, therefore, may not be making a point at all but simply informing you of her emotional state. She's not expecting anything to be done about it, there's no hidden message and there's no request for change or accusation of blame.

  When women talk to share feelings, they're often looking for reassurance. They're not necessarily looking for agreement or to be taken literally, but to be supported with empathy. When a woman says, "What a hectic day," a man should respond, "I know. One problem after another," or, "Yes, there's so much to do."

  But giving such emotional support is the opposite of the way a man would generally react. Men often minimize a problem to reduce stress, while women build it up and then reduce stress by relating to each other.

- **Talking to relieve tension.** Many times women will want to talk about a problem or series of problems just to feel better. By venting with a friend, they feel validated, and reduce stress as well as building trust. The discussion can also help them make sense of their situation. As they talk, they realize that some things aren't really as important as they thought.

  When a man hears a woman venting, he may misinterpret her behavior by assuming she's trying to get out of doing more. It may sound to him as if she's saying, "I have too much to do and I can't do it." That may indeed have been the feeling she started with, but it's not the point or message that she means to give.

  Men have insecure feelings too, but they don't advertise it. A man plans a strategy of action internally to relieve his stress and feel more confident. A woman finds the same confidence by expressing her feelings, and then a clear plan begins to emerge. However, most men can't understand this process or relate to it because talking about a problem rather than planning a solution makes them feel worse.

- **Talking to discover a point.** Sometimes women talk in a circular fashion, going around whatever it is they want to say until what they want to say emerges. This circular expression is foreign to many men and can be misinterpreted.

  In formal workplace situations, a successful woman will generally concentrate on sharing content to make a point. But in informal situations, she'll tend to blend all four forms of expression into one.

  To earn respect in the workplace, a woman needs to be aware of how she might be viewed by others, and make adjustments. When she wants to explore an idea to discover the point - which can lead men to become impatient - she could say, "I'm not sure exactly what I want to say. Let me think out loud with you." When she wants to express feelings to feel better, she could say, "Do you have a few minutes? I just want to vent some random feelings." After doing that, she could add, "Thanks. I feel better," making the man aware the interaction wasn't a waste of time. When she wants to share small talk to connect, she could say, "Let's take a break from work for a while," and then ask a personal question, sharing more from her side as the other person opens up.

**Other Differences**

In similar fashion, both men and women have to learn to change their communication patterns to deal with some of the other gender differences in the workplace. These include:

- **Reactions to stress.** Under stress, men tend to focus more while women expand more, sharing feelings. When asked to do something, a man may grumble and a woman might then conclude he's resentful or unwilling to do what he has been asked, when in fact he's simply adjusting to the need to change focus. On the other hand, a woman's sharing can seem like grumbling to a man - complaining about nothing - and he might conclude she's whining or blaming.

- **Confronting problems.** When faced with a problem, a man's first response is to solve it on his own while a woman's reaction is to reach out and include others through talking about it. As a result, men appear more
assertive and women more collaborative - a difference that can create friction and tension.

- **Positive and negative feelings.** Men respect positive feelings such as confidence, joy, satisfaction, pride, humor, happy relief and relaxation. They don't respect negative feelings. As a result, they'll focus on expressing positive feelings rather than negative ones. For women, the sharing of all feelings - positive or negative - is equally precious, as it builds relationships.

- **Speed of response.** Men are reassured by confident and quick answers but women trust someone who understands their particular problems. For men, that means understanding that on Venus, showing how you care has more to do with how you listen and respond than with what you say and do. Men have to learn not to rush to make a point, ask questions to gather information, avoid interrupting with solutions, and reflect on what’s being said, in order to help a woman clarify her own thinking.

**Conclusion**

In baseball, a switch hitter has an advantage because of the ability to choose to bat right-handed or left-handed depending on the situation. Likewise, in the workplace, men and women have to learn to respect the unspoken rules and values of the other gender and develop the ability to switch back and forth according to what's most appropriate.

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*About the Author: John Gray is a therapist specializing in communication and relationships, and the author of 12 best-sellers on gender differences.*

**Related Reading**

Any of these books can be ordered directly from [Amazon](A), [Barnes & Noble](B) or [Chapters](C).

- **Sex and Business:** Ethics of Sexuality in Business and the Workplace, by Shere Hite, Prentice Hall, 2000, ISBN 0273641980  
- **The Emotional Intelligence Activity Book:** 50 Activities for Promoting EQ at Work, by Adele B. Lynn, Amacom, 2001, ISBN 0814471234