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He Said, She Said: Communicating Between Genders at Work

By Beth Banks Cohn, PhD, and Roz Usheroff

If you think it's difficult to discern what your significant other is really trying to say to you, consider how complicated communication between genders gets when you throw office politics, power struggles, and work challenges into the mix.

At work, men and women use strategies in communicating with each other that the opposite sex may view negatively. Often, misunderstandings can be avoided when coworkers look beyond personalities and consider the different ways men and women communicate.

Let's look at a few examples from both sides.

MEN'S BEHAVIOR

Trash Talk. Men use negative banter, joking, teasing, and playful putdowns as a way to subtly keep themselves at the top of the power hierarchy. Such "trash talking" is a common component of male relating.

What women think: Making others feel small is decidedly *not* a female trait. Women tend to see putdowns as arrogant or hostile.

The middle ground: In general, trash talk is usually harmless, as long as both parties "play." When both parties engage in it, it can even be a way to bond around a problem, such as a trying work assignment or demanding sales quotas.

Prideful self-sufficiency. You've heard the jokes about men not asking for directions? In work settings, males sometimes ask few questions, fearing that doing so will communicate to others that they don't know something. Males tend to equate knowledge with power and don't want to diminish their image by showing they lack the necessary know-how.

What women think: Women see this behavior as childish and even arrogant. They also look at it as a giant waste of time, figuring it is more time effective to ask a question, get the answer, and move on.

The middle ground: Some workplace cultures discourage questions, and indeed make people feel self-conscious about asking too many. In meetings or other settings where everyone needs to be on the same page in order to develop the best strategy, both genders need to find ways to get and give clarification.

Not Giving Feedback. Because men don't solicit feedback, good or bad, they also don't give feedback in return. Males don't want to be criticized, feel that compliments make someone less effective, and think women who seek feedback are "needy" and "high maintenance."

What women think: Women think men don't value their contributions, and are overly critical. They may even feel that men withhold positive feedback in order to

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The mission of the American Business Women's Association is to bring together businesswomen of diverse occupations and to provide opportunities for them to help themselves and others grow personally and professionally through leadership, education, networking support and national recognition.



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avoid giving women promotions or good projects.

The middle ground: Constructive feedback should be built into the workplace culture. Both genders need to find a way to make it a tool for improving performance and productivity.

WOMEN'S BEHAVIOR

Equality-minded. Women try to maintain an appearance of equality amongst everyone. They are concerned with the effect of the exchange on the other person, and want to make sure everyone feels like a worthy contributor.

What men think: Men tend to see this as a sign that women lack confidence and competence as leaders. They feel it makes women look weak.

The middle ground: Females can wield an enormous amount of power by orchestrating collaboration and enlisting the cooperation between many parties. Men can learn from this. Nevertheless, women in leadership positions need to maintain a clear boundary between their authority and that of others.

Outside-in Negotiating. Females want to see the full picture and make sure everyone's on the same page with the same level of understanding before making a decision.

What men think: Since this is the *exact* opposite of what men typically do, men think this tactic means women don't have a clear position or aren't decisive enough.

The middle ground: In negotiations, it's imperative to know all the factors involved before making a decision. On

the other hand, trying to make everyone happy is not how leaders make good decisions. A balanced blend of female thoroughness and male decisiveness is ideal.

Likely to Downplay Certainty. Women don't want to appear pushy or uncaring of others' positions or ideas.

What men think: Men think, therefore, that women *aren't* certain and need someone to take charge.

The middle ground: Moderate self-deprecation and humility are good qualities in leaders. But always deferring to others' opinions and perspectives will be perceived as a sign of weakness. Find a middle way.

When it comes to communicating between genders in the workplace, the cardinal rule is this: *Don't judge*. Instead, try to look carefully at your coworker's behavior, consider that some of it may be gender based, and try to gain insight on how this behavior serves or does not serve his or her objectives. If you want to step in and give support, do it from a position of understanding.

* * * * *



Beth Banks Cohn, PhD, (left) is a leading expert in change management and leadership development. Roz Usheroff (right) is an internationally recognized communication expert and personal branding executive

coach. They are coauthors of the new book, Taking the Leap: Managing Your Career in Turbulent Times ... and Beyond.

WIN Module Highlight: Goal Setting and Measuring Results



Do you foresee growth for your Express Network in the near future?

Goal setting and measuring results are important actions to take toward securing the success of your team.

To learn more about the process you should follow when setting goals, take advantage of your free WIN course "ABWA Goal Setting and Measuring Results." Express Network members who have paid for WIN receive this as one of 10 free WIN modules.

If you're interested in adding WIN to your membership, you can login and make your payment by visiting the member login tab at www.abwa.org. Click on the WIN logo above for steps on using ABWA's member login.

ABWA's Proud Code of Conduct

1. All members will serve as goodwill ambassadors for the American Business Women's Association.
2. Members will not allow their personal beliefs and convictions to interfere with the representation of ABWA's mission.
3. Members will always treat their member colleagues, guests, vendors and sponsors with honesty, respect, fairness, integrity, responsibility, kindness, and in good faith.
4. Members will maintain compliance with ABWA National, Chapter and Express Network Bylaws.
5. Members will not use their personal power to advance their personal interests.
6. Members will strive for excellence in their professions by maintaining and enhancing their own business knowledge and skills, and by encouraging the professional development of other members.

Highlighting Best Practices Groups: The River City Express Network

By Mia Katz

News of the River City Express Network's attainment of Best Practices, level one in September came as little surprise to members of the strategic group.

"Frankly, we would have been surprised *not* to achieve this," says Marianne Lawrence, a charter member of the River City Express Network and the Express Network's board advisor, Web site manager and newsletter editor. "Our year-long attention to our planning chart keeps our goals front and center and we are always aware of our progress," she says.

"Our group likes to be recognized as one of the best," she continues. "The Best Practices criteria give us a baseline for establishing our goals for the year. We know that working toward the Best Practices award will make us a better network."



(Above) Members of the River City Express Network accept their Best Practices award at the 2009 ABWA National Women's Leadership Conference in September. Photo by Terry Howard.

Marianne shares that the attainment of such a goal required spending quality time working on goal-setting and formulating tactics and strategies.

"We have lively discussions of whether suggested goals are realistic and achievable," she says. "We try to be as detailed as possible about the steps we'll take to achieve the goals we finally decide on, who will be responsible, what the projected budget will be and how we will measure our progress. It's not always a particularly easy process, but a valuable one (and) is the most important part of our annual planning."

To gain the 50 members required to achieve this level of Best Practices, President Elect and former Vice President of Membership Marcia Robertson explains that meetings are very positive and upbeat and the group ensures that everyone feels welcome. In addition, "Everyone on the (membership)

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What it Means to Achieve Best Practices

One of the highlights of the 2009 National Women's Leadership Conference in September was the recognition of outstanding ABWA groups. Groups that were awarded ABWA's Best Practices satisfactorily met rigorous criteria designed to ensure the strength and vitality of the Association and individual ABWA groups. The Association is proud to report it experienced a 25 percent increase in the total Best Practices performance compared to last year, and it encourages Express Networks to reap from the benefits of such success by continuing the trend in the years ahead.



The Southwest Valley Express Network achieved 2008-2009 Best Practices, Level III. Above: 2009 National President Vicki Marlett (left) presents the award to Southwest Valley Express Network member Geanie Aldridge (center) alongside past District VI Vice President Michelle Egbert.

primary members to an ABWA district conference and/or ABWA's National Women's Leadership Conference in the current award year.

Level Two — To achieve this level, among other requirements a group must have created a business plan and budget, have a minimum of 40 primary members in good standing on the group's roster on July 31, 2009, and sponsored the attendance for at least four primary members to an ABWA district conference and/or ABWA's National Women's Leadership Conference in the current award year.

Level Three — To achieve this level, among other requirements, a group must have created a business plan and budget, have a minimum of 30 primary members in

good standing on the group's roster on July 31, 2009, and sponsored the attendance for at least three primary members in good standing to an ABWA district conference and/or ABWA's National Women's Leadership Conference.

To learn all of the criteria for being recognized as a Best Practices group, search in WIN for the document titled "Strive for Excellence in Group Management: ABWA's Best Practices."

Best Practices Levels — An Overview

There are three Best Practices levels that can be reached.

Level One — To achieve this level, among other requirements, a group must have created a business plan and budget, have a minimum of 50 primary members in good standing on the group's roster on July 31, 2009 and sponsored the attendance (paid a complete registration or the dollar equivalent) for at least six

committee takes turns hosting the meeting,” she says. “They ask the new members to help work the check-in tables at the meetings. This is a great way for the new members to meet the current members.” Marcia says the group also has network socials outside of their monthly meetings, which they have found to be well-attended. Marcia adds that another key has been mentorship and the goal that no new member is left with uncertainty about her opportunities as part of the group, and the chance she can make a difference as a leader.

“Once guests become new members, we team them up with a ‘network navigator,’ ” Marcia says. “This is a seasoned member who takes them under their wing and shows them ‘the ropes.’ We also encourage all the new members to join a committee. One of the best benefits of RCEN is that we offer a wide range of committees. There is something for everyone.”

Photos, clockwise, from the top: after volunteering for the Central Virginia Food Bank, River City Express Network members gather at Kitchen 64 restaurant; members at the August 2009 network meeting celebrate the network’s 8th anniversary; 2008 RCEN Project Coordinator Cindy Mims presents the keys to members of the Finney Family, as part of the Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity.



More Best Practices Features to Come!
 Read our special “Best Practices” column in upcoming issues to learn more about other extraordinary Express Network Best Practices groups.



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By shopping at ABWA’s shopping portal on the WIN opening page at www.abwa.org, when you make a purchase at any one of the stores you find, a percentage of money will be donated back to the ABW Foundation.

