

Remembering gender in business communications can increase success

By Michael Gurian

Every day, in whatever our business, our work is a “second home,” filled with women and men. Whether we are running the corporation, climbing the ladder, fulfilling a project, just entering the workplace or getting ready to apply for a job, we are involved in interactions between the sexes.

In our GenderLeadership work, my colleagues and I like to say: A million years of human history walks with you into every one of your workdays. The human brain has not only been evolving a “human” brain for a million years, but also a male and female version of that brain. Brain researchers have discovered over 100 structural differences between the male and female brain. These differences impact how we communicate, deal with conflict, run meetings, present ourselves to others, negotiate, make deals, form work groups and finish projects.

The savvy CEO, manager, employee and applicant need to know about these differences. Let’s take two examples, one female and one male, to show you how practical the applications of these differences are in our work life. Daily innovations like these, developed by women and men who’ve been trained in male/female differences, have been proven over the last decade to lead to greater success for women and men in corporations and firms such as Deloitte & Touche, IBM, Brooks Sports, Procter & Gamble, and many others.

The following are tips for a woman wanting to better communicate and build relationships with more senior males:

- Cut back on apologies and diminutive verbal clauses. Women often say, “Sorry, . . .” then continue

sentences, or “Don’t you think that’s a good idea?” instead of “Here’s a good idea.” Women do this for biochemical, neural and social reasons. Men often take this as weakness, which leaves the woman one-down in a hierarchy.

- Use fewer words in general and more words that are right on target. Men’s brains generally process fewer words than women’s brains, thus they are listening (and judging others) by the person’s ability to clearly make an important point. As women bring clarity and powerful brevity to dialogues with senior males, they are more impressive to those men. When women (or men) wander in conversation, senior males often think, “There isn’t time for this!” and start to zone out, their eyes glazing over. This is a bad sign for the speaker.

- Prove and promote yourself. For a number of biochemical, neural and social reasons, women tend to defer to others. It is actually a way of gaining power, and quite useful – it leads to consensus and a powerful female leadership style – but if it’s practiced too much, the woman does not say, “Here is what I have done, here is what I’m about, look closely at me.” Through well-planned words and actions, women gain power by making sure others know what they have accomplished.

Here are tips for a man who wants to bring in more business from prospective female clients:

- Work on listening skills and rapport building. Women often bond via substantial time in conversation. For a number of biochemical, neural and social reasons, the bonding process that begins an interaction is as crucial to the woman’s business style as is the topic or project at hand. If men don’t get trained in the art of bonding with women, they lose clients, and thus, potentially millions of dollars.

- Learn to control your tone of voice and facial expressions. The female brain hears much more tonal information and sees much more facial subtlety than the male. Harsh tones, abruptness, or lack of facial attentiveness (wandering eyes) can destroy an interaction, and lose you this client. Listen, nod, interact, keep eye contact as is appropriate, take notes (even when you are bored). Your attentiveness matters more than you may know!

- Interrupt much less than you may do now, encourage and admire, and try to link your comment to the end of her comment. For instance, “We’re going off on a tangent, let me interrupt you, let’s look at the prospectus,” can be a bad way to go. Better is, “I like what you said about _____, and you’re so right. This same thing happened with my nephew, who _____. I hadn’t thought of what it meant till you said _____. This perspective you have on all this makes me even more certain that my _____ (product or service) is right for you, and here’s how.”

In all six of these cases, there are aspects of general good communication. In each case, too, aspects of male/female brain difference help us become more successful with our target audience.

My colleagues and I call this success “GenderLeadership.” Because its practical tools can now be based in a scientific foundation, it is poised to continue to positively alter our workforce, one person and one interaction at a time.

Michael Gurian is The New York Times best-selling author of “Leadership And The Sexes: Using Gender Science To Create Success In Business” (August 2008, with Barbara Annis). For more about GenderLeadership, click www.genderleadership.com.

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