

Breaking Down the Language Barrier: Nine Keys to Effectively Communicating with Men

As a woman who worked alongside many men for 22 years, I have become painfully aware of the different communication styles of men and women. Always presented in a men-are-from-Mars-women-are-from-Venus kind of way, these styles are often described as “debate vs. relate,” “report vs. rapport,” or “competitive vs. cooperative.” These styles present men as a group that seeks straightforward solutions to problems and useful advice, and women as a group that tends to try to establish intimacy by discussing problems and showing concern and empathy.

Though men and women do tend to communicate differently, there are strengths in both of their methods. Typically, women are better at interpreting nonverbal communication, while men are often more goal-oriented and convey more strength of purpose in their dealings with colleagues. To gain information, women want to talk about feelings and people, whereas men talk about things and activities to gain information. For women, revealing information about themselves is a way of establishing a connection with colleagues. Men often see such disclosure as unnecessary, inappropriate, or threatening.

All of these methods can result in successful, positive communication. But unfortunately, it's not uncommon for a breakdown to occur when men and women communicate with each other (Anyone who's married knows!). It doesn't have to be that way. It needn't be a “your” style vs. “his” style situation. Women can tear down the language barrier that sometimes exists between men and women by following a few simple rules.

Here are nine keys that I feel will help you in communicating with men.

Do not look for hidden meanings. When men and women communicate with one another, women look for hidden meanings in tone, facial expressions, and body language because that is part of the way we interpret how others are communicating. But men do not use facial expressions and body language in the same way as women. It's just not part of their communication strategy. For men it's all about the basics: When they're happy, they smile. When they're sad, they frown. Keep that in mind, and you can save yourself the trouble of trying to decipher their every move.

Men are not mind readers. Communicating with men is “cross cultural.” From the time women and men are children they are spoken to in different ways. As a result, the communication expectation is different for boys and for girls. With girls it is all about the relationship, and the involvement we have with people. Therefore, as we mature, we carry this communication style with us. Because we value the relationship and the involvement, we feel that when we communicate with men, they too care about the involvement and they “understand” us without us having to say what we mean. Remember this: Men will NEVER understand what we are saying unless we SAY EXACTLY what we mean.

Understand that men say what they need to say with less words. Most little girls play “house” or “teacher” when they’re growing up, often with only one or two other girls. Both are activities that require a lot of conversation between all of the participants. Consequently, as we engage in communications as grown women, we tend to want to talk more intimately to other people. Men on the other hand, as they were growing up, tended to play in groups, engaging in sports or other activities where less verbal interaction was required. As a result, men grew up talking less and saying what they need to say with fewer words. So if you’re ever in a conversation with a man, and he has a small words-per-answer ratio, it isn’t because he is being short with you. That’s simply the communication style he knows best.

Realize that men really are good listeners. We as women like to be regarded as good listeners. When listening to a conversation, we tend to nod our heads and make sounds to indicate that we are listening. Men, however, do not feel the need to nod or make any noise at all while we are talking. Unfortunately, we tend to misconstrue this silence as disinterest when that isn’t the case.

Eliminate “tag” questions and disclaimers. When women communicate, we tend to use “tag” questions and disclaimers that prevent us from truly saying what we mean. For instance when using tag questions we might say, “It sure is raining hard, isn’t it?”, or “I think we are being a little loud, don’t you?” Or in the same way, we might use disclaimers by saying, “I may be wrong, but I think that it is raining hard.” Or “I may be way off base here, but I think we are being a little loud.” Both of these tactics can result in a perception by our male counterparts that we are less assertive and more tentative in our authority so they should be avoided.

Engage in strategic questioning in meetings. Another communication phenomenon that occurs in male-dominated fields is that men tend to monopolize the discussion when in meetings. In order to gain the floor, try engaging in strategic questioning. What do I mean by that? Strategic questions are questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” answer. A strategic question has the ability to illicit new information rather than to focus on the same old stagnant information that everyone is already aware of. For instance, say in a meeting a male colleague is describing a proposal he recently finished and is talking about how profitable that job will be if the company is the successful bidder. Rather than asking, “How much money will come into the bottom line?” ask, “How will this influx of money into the company affect us?” A strategic question tends to analyze and provide options and is ultimately more dynamic and will help you gain the floor more often.

Remember that men use communication to establish and maintain status. Several studies have found that even very early in life, boys give orders as a way of gaining social status. The high-status boys gave orders just to maintain their dominance, not because they particularly needed a certain task done. And the boys who were being told what to do were low-status by virtue of doing what they were told. Women almost never understand the resistance that men seem to have when a request is made of them. But it helps women to understand that for men, taking an order from a woman means that they have lost status in that particular relationship. Men might feel that women are trying to

manipulate them. What we see as a simple request, is seen by a man as an attempt to manipulate him into a lower status. If we can keep this “primal” communication style in mind, we can be less offended when men show resistance.

Do not let your emotions into the fray. Men like straight answers. They do not like to beat around the bush and they do not like to try to decipher what you are saying when you start to discuss feelings. Remember, it is NOT about you. It is about the task in a man’s mind.

Don’t interrupt when sharing your opinions. Women tend to want to interject opinions when talking to men. Studies have shown that the person who “interrupts” is seen as less intelligent than the one who is speaking. Listen carefully to what your male colleague is saying and when he is finished speaking, verbally summarize key points and then offer your opinion.

There will always be gender differences in communication. But if we can learn what makes the communication styles of men tick and adapt our own styles so they match up better with our male counterparts’ styles, our communication with men will not only be better, but it will be easier as well.