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her five year-old son and 51 year-old husband.

## **YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND, OR CONFESSIONS OF A MALE MANAGER**

When I called GraceAnne DeCandido, the program chair, to discuss this talk, I was concerned about several things.

First, I couldn't go to the meeting scheduled with the other speakers because the Pay Equity Committee, which I chair, was meeting at the same time.

It was essential that I talk with her, both to get her approval for what I planned to say, and to ensure that I wouldn't be giving the same speech as the other speakers.

I explained that the chief sources for my remarks were **You Just Don't Understand**, by Deborah Tannen, and incidents from my own experience. My specific experiences wouldn't be duplicated by the others, even if there might be some parallels.

But Tannen's book was so powerful and so persuasive, I couldn't imagine how any other speaker could talk about **Gender and Communication...** without substantial reference to this work.

GraceAnne was thrilled that I chose this book. She said that the other speakers would have plenty to say, and, to her knowledge, would not be drawing upon Tannen.

This was gratifying for me because it supported my approach to this talk, and because GraceAnne was made happy by my choice of source material. Lest I appear unduly enlightened, credit for my using Tannen's book is due to GraceAnne. It was on a list of three titles she urged the speakers to consider in preparing their remarks.

GraceAnne also said she understood that I wouldn't be able to join the other speakers and her for breakfast, and thanked me for discussing my talk with her and letting her know I couldn't attend. She was pleased, though, that I would be joining her and the other speakers for lunch.

At this point, especially for the males in the audience, a certain discomfort may be occurring, that is, you may be thinking, **When the hell is he going to get to the point of the program and dispense with all of this storytelling about who he talked to, who he could and could not meet with, and what he planned to say?**

This question offers a good point of departure for understanding gender communication problems according to Tannen.

Tannen makes the same fundamental points in a variety of ways throughout **You Just Don't Understand**. According to her, most men tend to use the communication process as a means of asserting their independence, and achieving status and a superior hierarchical position.

Most women communicate for the purpose of establishing relationships of intimacy and interdependence.

Tannen also uses other paired concepts to expand on the same points. Men in their communications tend to have a **symmetrical** or unequal relationships; women tend to communicate in a **symmetrical** fashion. Another distinction, especially insightful for me, is her characterizing most male communication as taking the form of a **report**, and most female communication having as its object the establishment of **rapport**, i.e. report versus rapport.

How do these distinctions have anything to do with my opening story?

I said that the males might be experiencing discomfort because I wasn't getting to the point and instead gave all of this autobiography about who I spoke with, what was said, and why I could or couldn't be somewhere.

According to Tannen, males in their communications tend to be strongly directed to goal achievement, especially with their independence as the result. If this speech doesn't demonstrate my expertise, my superior knowledge of the topic at hand, and doesn't place the audience in a subordinate position with respect to me, it will fail, at least in these male terms.

Neither the story I told, nor the information I reviewed with GraceAnne does anything to achieve this status or establish that independence.

For men this also might appear to be hopeless toadying, as well as pointless non sequitur.  
[forgive the redundancy]

But if I correctly understand Tannen, the women in this audience will tend to accept and be made comfortable by the introductory spiel. And I am sure that GraceAnne found it very reassuring to hear such expressions of support for her plans for the program, and probably was pleased by the overall conversation, as was I.

Because communication for most women involves the establishment of intimacy, interdependence, and rapport, my telling this audience about how I spoke with the Program Chair about my speech, one of the books she suggested, and the breakfast and lunch meetings--all tended to establish rapport between GraceAnne and me.

With your permission, let me illustrate further.

Tannen says that women tend to be uncomfortable talking in large groups because of the difficulty of establishing intimacy or connections with a group--for example, it is hard for an audience to offer reassuring feedback or support to a speaker; but it is easy for two or three other women to offer a friend expressions and interjections of support.

This latter process, a small group of women speaking to each other in such a congenial manner characterizes most female communication.

I was dealing with my female-like discomfort at talking to a large impersonal group by expressing my connectedness to the program chair, and thereby giving myself some needed reassurance and support.

Toward the end of carting off this dead horse which I promise to stop beating, we now can see that I was scared to be talking to you, and used the whole story that began this speech to comfort and reassure myself by recalling all of the connections and support of the program chair for what I planned to do.

If the men in the audience judge this account off the point, demeaning to me, and generally indicative of poor performance and inferiority on my part, may I suggest to them that when placed in the context of male-female communication patterns, the foregoing has been very much to the point and well illustrates some of the differences in how differently the two genders communicate.

With reference to my own experience and Tannen's conceptual framework for understanding how men and women communicate I will discuss some of the questions posed by GraceAnne for the speakers.

(1) How Does Gender Effect How People Use Language?

Based on Tannen's research a gender-mixed setting will find most men using discourse to assert their independence and to achieve superior status, and women offering comments which will tend to support or establish connections with others in the group.

Further, her research suggests that women in a group which includes men will tend to not speak at all, or attempt to find ways to be agreeable with the speaker even if they differ to some degree with the male speaker, or worse yet, believe he is wrong!

In my own experience I recall my frustration, anger and silence in response to a male friend's chopping away at several consecutive comments I made. He took each one, including those offered in agreement with his previously known views, and commented in such a way as to put me down, show himself to be an expert, and impress the-others present with his superiority.

My female-like reaction, as noted, was to be hurt and to avoid further conversation with him which meant being quiet much more than I wanted to be.

One must grasp immediately how disastrous such a pattern of communication is for an organization's individuals and overall service goals. And not coincidentally, this is the kind of experience that sets off the wars between the genders, even if the example describes a communication between two males.

Despite the patterns evidenced by their manner of communication, men have no exclusive dominion over truth. But their communication patterns tend not to prevent men from trying to establish such a position of command over what is true, right, fair or reasonable. Tannen states: further that most men tend to be more comfortable with such abstract concepts rather than specific cases.

Even though Tannen made every effort to be non-judgmental in her accounting for communication differences, one would think that the degree of conflict in the group will tend to increase with the number of men present.

What to do? What I did in that social context was to lick my wounds and discuss the situation later with my wife, who as a woman communicator and decent human being, offered commiseration, support, and understanding.

This helped with the hurt, but there still is next time to deal with. Perhaps I can offer some useful thoughts for all of us in dealing with the next time.

In the event that such an incident recurs with that person, or a similarly perceived one with someone else, I will state my discomfort and unhappiness with the way that person is talking to me. The options open to me, depending on the person's response, are to try to explain, what specifically is hurtful for me in what the person is saying, and how it inhibits my wanting to even talk to him at all.

What if this person is the boss?

I still suggest the direct approach unless there is ample evidence to suggest that even, the hint of criticism is suicidal. Assuming the man is a decent person--something I know is true of my friend--he will be surprised at the comments, try to understand them, and at least for the present, work to avoid the kind of territoriality and superiority that seems so essential to male behavior in a group setting.

If the man is a terrible person and not just evincing male communication patterns, one has a much different problem on one's hands. How to deal with terrible people in the workplace and elsewhere is beyond the bounds of this discussion.

(2) How Does Gender Have an Effect on How People Give and Receive Orders?

The Incident I wish to relate, has a strong similarity to one offered by Tannen to illustrate her thesis. First, mine.

In a previous incarnation I was head of technical services at a good-sized public library. It was a traditional organization, and included several catalogers--all female, who reported to the male head cataloger, who, in turn, was supervised by me.

The head cataloger was especially sensitive to structure and worked very hard to avoid any hint of it in his work with his colleagues in the cataloging section, professional or otherwise. In fact the only statement I can ever recall his having made to me that had anything to do with his assertion of organizational power and independence was, "**You can ask whatever you want, but I won't dragoon the troops.**"

One time, the head cataloger took a vacation of two weeks or so. He was gone long enough so that the person who was acting as head cataloger had to exercise some supervisory responsibility with respect to the other catalogers, normally her peers.

Hearing no complaints nor seeing any hint of problems while he was gone, I went my merry way dealing with the nasty little things perplexing me at the time. But after he came back from his vacation, he took me aside and told me an interesting story.

It became clear to him that in his absence the person who served as acting head cataloger developed a pretty tough act. She became the head cataloger that, as a stereotype, most library workers have problems with, and closely parallels the up-tight hierarchically happy male communication pattern, or worse, that Tannen described.

She was oppressive, authoritarian, and tended to push around the people in the cataloging section, sending down decisions and directives to her subordinates who just a few days earlier were her organizational peers.

His complaint to me was more of a lament at his observation of the human condition as manifest by this noxious transformation.

Tannen tells of the case of a man who had a peer working relationship with several women, and seemingly sympathized with and went along with their alienation or feeling of distance from their supervisor and the work that was expected of them. He seemed to be one of them.

Tannen went on to describe their shock and dismay when, after having been promoted, he became a little despot issuing rules, orders and fiats. His segue from peer to oppressor does not surprise Tannen.

She accounts for his behavior, and the acting head cataloger's tyranny as well, by suggesting that in a context where one's need to exercise independence and authority is not a viable option, one will tend to withdraw and avoid participation.

In Tannen's example, that indeed is what the man did, but his withdrawal and relative silence were misinterpreted as agreement and support by his female peers, an error they understood all too well once he was promoted.

What to do here? The return of the head cataloger from vacation was a simple solution to the problem I described. Underlying both examples are the hurt feelings and disappointment of the women supervised. I can only offer the same advice that I offered when I was hurt by a friend whose status needs were both paramount and overwhelming.

What still remains is the fundamental communication conflict between most men and women, that is, most males seeking independence, and status, and most women seeking intimacy and interdependence.

Also remaining is the sad result of this conflict: most women feeling hurt, misunderstood or angry, and men feeling the same when their communication needs are not met.

Probably the best basis for functional communication between the genders in the workplace and elsewhere is for all concerned to know and understand how differently men and women tend to communicate.

This means that men will have to listen differently and respond in sympathetic ways to women, whether they agree with them or not; and that women will have to be more assertive and less submissive in communicating with men.

There is no need for most women to learn to be more supportive of men--as Tannen's research shows, they already do a fine job of reinforcing male status and independence.

Perhaps a concluding note should recognize that most management trends in the last few decades have emphasized participatory management. Real participation in which hierarchical lines are blurred, everybody has some say in what is decided, and consensus is a goal will tend to validate and support the woman's role. But female and male communication differences will still exist, in even the most participative of processes.

In sum, communication success for all will be achieved only when we extend to each other greater mutual understanding and respect.

I would like to presume on this group with a final editorial comment. Tannen never says male communication is bad and female communication is good.

Nonetheless my examples, even with the roles switched around, clearly seemed to be making some judgments, which I will stand by.

As we reach Columbus's quincentennial, I think of the Native People on the shores of their island welcoming these strangers with open arms and gifts, and Columbus and his successors responding with guns and chains to establish their superiority and dominance. We all must really do better.