



## **Decoding the Workplace Communication Differences Between the Sexes** **By Jean Maslanka Kelley**

If you're a woman, you may sometimes wonder how your male colleagues can get into a heated discussion during a business meeting, end the meeting with issue unresolved, yet walk out of the room as the best of friends.

And if you're a man, you may get frustrated when talking with your female co-workers about one topic, and they bring fourteen more topics into the conversation – all of which seem totally unrelated.

We all know that men and women think and act differently, both at work and at home, but knowing there are differences between people is only half the battle. To have successful working relationships with members of the opposite sex, you also have to know why those differences matter and what to do about them. The good news is that with a little insight into men and women, you can overcome the apparent communication and behavioral challenges that plague any workplace and gain greater understanding of each other.

### **Once Upon a Time...**

Before we can look forward to a harmonious future, we need to begin by looking back into human evolution. Once upon a time about a million years ago, communities consisted of hunters (men) and gatherers (women). The hunters left every morning and tried to hunt food for the community. The gatherers stayed home and gathered the nuts and berries and made preparations for the food the men would bring back. So as far back as scientists can tell, women and men had different roles, and as a result, their brains developed in different ways.

For example, a man's brain goes in and out of a rest state all day. Millions of years ago when men sat in trees waiting for their prey, they had to be quiet and disengaged. They didn't want to scare away their potential dinner. So their brain evolved to learn to engage, disengage, engage, disengage throughout the day.

Women, on the other hand, couldn't do that. They had to be on high alert all day, protecting themselves and their children as they gathered necessities and tended to the community's needs. Their brains evolved to be always active.

In fact, if you look at an fMRI (functional MRI) of a man's brain at rest and a woman's brain at rest, you'll see that the woman's brain is busy and firing everywhere, whereas the man's brain is quiet. This is not to say that one gender is better than the other; it's simply an illustration of one of the many differences between men and women and how it evolved.

So what else is different from a brain wiring perspective? Here are a few highlights:

- Brain chemicals. Men produce more testosterone, and women produce more oxytocin. Testosterone is an aggressive chemical, and oxytocin is a "tend and befriend" kind of chemical. These chemicals are significant drivers in a person's brain.
- Cycles. While women have a 28 day cycle, men have a cycle every day. Their testosterone spikes in the morning when they wake up (so they can go out and

hunt), wanes in the afternoon, and spikes again in the evening around 8 p.m. It then goes back down, only to repeat the cycle the next day.

- Brain matter. Men have more gray matter, while women have more white matter. The gray matter is used for local processing of thoughts and tasks. The white matter is what connects everything. This is why when a woman is processing an emotional event, she will do so immediately. All the interconnections make processing faster in her mind. A man is processing locally and will do so for a longer time. He doesn't have the same type of factors to draw from.
- Hierarchy. While both men and women understand hierarchy, men *really* understand it. Whoever brought back the biggest animal from hunt received the most status in the community. So that desire to be "top dog" and get their point across is innate in men. Likewise, women wanted the security of being with the men who could provide the most food for the family, which is why even today women (no matter what their income level or social status) want to be associated with successful men. It's hardwired.

Of course, there are always exceptions to every rule. Within the spectrum of both male and female brains, there are gradations. There is also something called the "bridge brain," which is someone who has characteristics of both the male and female brains.

### **Why This Matters**

Because we're working and communicating with each other every day, knowing the differences in gender communications is vital. Much has already been written about personality, values, and behavioral differences in communication; now it's time to overlap gender differences into the equation.

For example, while women have distinct viewpoints on topics, when they communicate they often try to "keep the peace." Men, however, are typically more aggressive in their communications, more argumentative about their ideas, and more vocal about their stand on a certain thing.

Women focus on building consensus. And because they're contextual and they process information in the white matter, they're often trying to reduce the heated arguments. This doesn't mean a woman doesn't like a good argument; however, if it gets hostile and the woman gets stressed, she'll start producing oxytocin, which will prompt her to take steps to calm the situation down.

And because women have so much white matter, they may take a longer time to answer a question because they're filtering it through the article they read this morning or what their boss said two days ago. Think of it like sorting in a computer. They're doing a huge sort through the entire database to arrive at an answer.

### **Tips for Better Communication**

To ease the daily workplace communication challenges, keep the following points in mind:

*For men...*

- Keep women's white matter in mind. They are not jumping from topic to topic just to annoy you. In their brain, everything is connected.
- Remember that women "tend and befriend." As a result, they have a tendency to use

- up-talk – where it sounds like they end every sentence with a question mark. Or they say such things as “What do you think?” This does not mean they don’t know what to think. They simply want to gain consensus.
- Women all over the world tend to use more emotionally loaded words when they communicate. So they use high drama phrases and words such as “always” and “never” much more often than men do.

*For women...*

- If you want to talk to a man about something that’s critical, and you think he’s going to be defensive, don’t do it at the 9 a.m. meeting or after hours at the company dinner. Remember that daily cycle.
- Don’t jump from subject to subject, and always condense your thoughts into short sentences. Men have a word limit (this has been scientifically tested), and once they reach their word limit, it’s almost like a little blind goes down. They simply can’t process any more information.
- Remember that a man’s brain shifts into that rest state throughout the day. So when you’re talking to him and he’s fidgeting, tapping his fingers on the table, or even doodling during the meeting, it doesn’t necessarily mean he’s bored or not interested. In fact, it probably means just the opposite. He’s unconsciously forcing himself to stay alert, keeping his brain active by that movement.

### **Closing the Great Divide**

The key now is to accept this information, embrace it, and impose it as a new structure of thought in your own mind. Become conscious and aware of the differences between the sexes and use it in your daily interactions with others. By doing so, you can ease some of the frustrations you feel when communicating at work and build professional relationships built on understanding, collaboration, and trust.

*Visit [www.jeankelley.com](http://www.jeankelley.com) for more information on Jean Kelley’s consulting services. You can also find Jean on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/jeanmkelley](http://www.twitter.com/jeanmkelley) or on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/jeanmaslankakelley](http://www.linkedin.com/in/jeanmaslankakelley).*