

Let's talk

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Almost every week I rent a car for the weekend. I think of my trips to the car rental agency as a cultural study. You see, the staff are all men. Stereotypical men – the kind who like to talk about the game last night. Of course, I have usually slept through the game, trying to get some shut eye before my 11 month old does her mid-night waking routine. Truth be told, I would not have watched the game even if I was awake. I don't do hockey, basketball, football, insert other sport here...

Luckily for me, these guys have a fair amount of emotional intelligence. They've gotten to know me and realize that my priority is whether the car seat will fit in the vehicle they're renting me. They're a flexible bunch – they've dropped the banter and learned to talk baby with me. I appreciate it.

Having recently attended the Barristers' Society workshop on issues affecting women lawyers, I am reminded that my experience at the car rental agency is not uncommon. A woman lawyer can still frequently find herself alone in a room of men, be they colleagues or clients. Just like a man alone in a room of women, the experience can be isolating.

Permit me a generalization.... in our culture men and women tend to talk differently. We've all heard astonished women exclaim "he talks about his feelings!" Similarly, men may marvel at a woman who would rather shoot hoops that have an intimate candlelit conversation. The ways these style differences impact on our experiences in the workplace are discussed by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. in her book *Talking from 9 to 5*.

Tannen describes the conversational rituals of men that include banter, joking, teasing, playful put-downs, and expending effort to avoid the one-down position in the interaction. In contrast, she describes most women subscribing to conversational rituals focused on maintaining the appearance of equality, taking into account the effect of the exchange on the other person, and trying to downplay the speaker's authority so as to get the job done without flexing muscles in an obvious way.

As you can imagine, misunderstandings can easily crop up when these conversational styles conflict. Sometimes men are seen as arrogant or hostile, while women can be seen as less confident or competent. Each gender can feel unheard by the other.

While not all men and women demonstrate their gender's typical conversational style, the extent to which these rituals are followed impacts effective communication in our workplaces. The fact that our profession has historically been dominated by men has resulted in male styles of interaction becoming the cultural norm. The question for me is: "At what cost?" Regardless of which style you prefer, learning from and about other styles can serve you and your clients.

Here's some ways to improve communication at your firm:

Imagine being on the other side. We frequently try to imagine the opposing party's position on our files. How about imagining what it's like to be the lone woman in the room at a meeting of partners, or the lone man at a staff lunch.

Be aware of your conversational preferences. How does this affect your experience of the people you work with? Are your judgments taking into account different styles? Maybe you're a pretty typical guy and can banter with the best of them. You're wondering why your male articling clerk gets quiet on the golf course. Does he subscribe to the same conversational style as you? If his style is different will this affect his chances of being hired back or promoted?

Think about what style may be best for the situation. This is not an invitation to have women lawyers only serve women clients, or vice versa. As Tanner points out in her book, the best you can offer is flexibility – be aware of your own style and develop leadership skills so you can accommodate the styles of others. Maybe you're mentoring a few junior lawyers – take time to get to know their styles and engage them in ways that will help them feel comfortable to share their experiences and questions with you.

Take time to understand different styles to avoid misunderstandings. This will save you time and money. Tanner cites an excellent example in her book: generally when men are receiving feedback they'll interpret the first point made to them as the most important. Women like to soften negative feedback and start by saying something positive. No wonder a male articling clerk might think he's done a fine job on a brief when a female principal has really asked for major revisions.

What can you learn from other conversational styles? If our profession is to develop in a way that truly welcomes change and diversity, we must learn more about ourselves and those around us. If a woman asks more questions than a man, does that mean she knows less? Or is she simply willing to acknowledge what she doesn't know? If a man doesn't stop for directions, is he wasting time? Or is he developing navigational skills? What can you learn from opening up to new styles and perspectives?