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# Communicating with Credibility: The Gender Gap

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# Communicating with Credibility: The Gender Gap

## **Abstract**

By examining their listening, speaking, and nonverbal behavior, men and women can make wiser choices about how to present themselves and their ideas.

## **Keywords**

gender, hospitality industry, women, professional development

## **Disciplines**

Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Hospitality Administration and Management

## **Comments**

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# Communicating with Credibility: The Gender Gap

***By examining their listening, speaking, and nonverbal behavior, men and women can make wiser choices about how to present themselves and their ideas***

by **Judi Brownell**

WOMEN WORKING in the hospitality industry have made tremendous progress in their careers over the past decade. Perhaps this progress was best expressed by Leonard Roberts, chairman and chief executive officer of Shoney's, when he commented to his chain's top managers: "Wake up and smell

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the coffee. She isn't making it anymore."<sup>1</sup>

There are over eight million people in today's hospitality work force. Since two-thirds of the employees in service industries are women, we might guess that some five million hospitality-industry workers are women.<sup>2</sup> In spite of increases in the number of women pursuing hospitality-related

careers, women appear to be confronting significant obstacles to their professional development. Across the country they are leaving the industry at a much higher rate than men.<sup>3</sup>

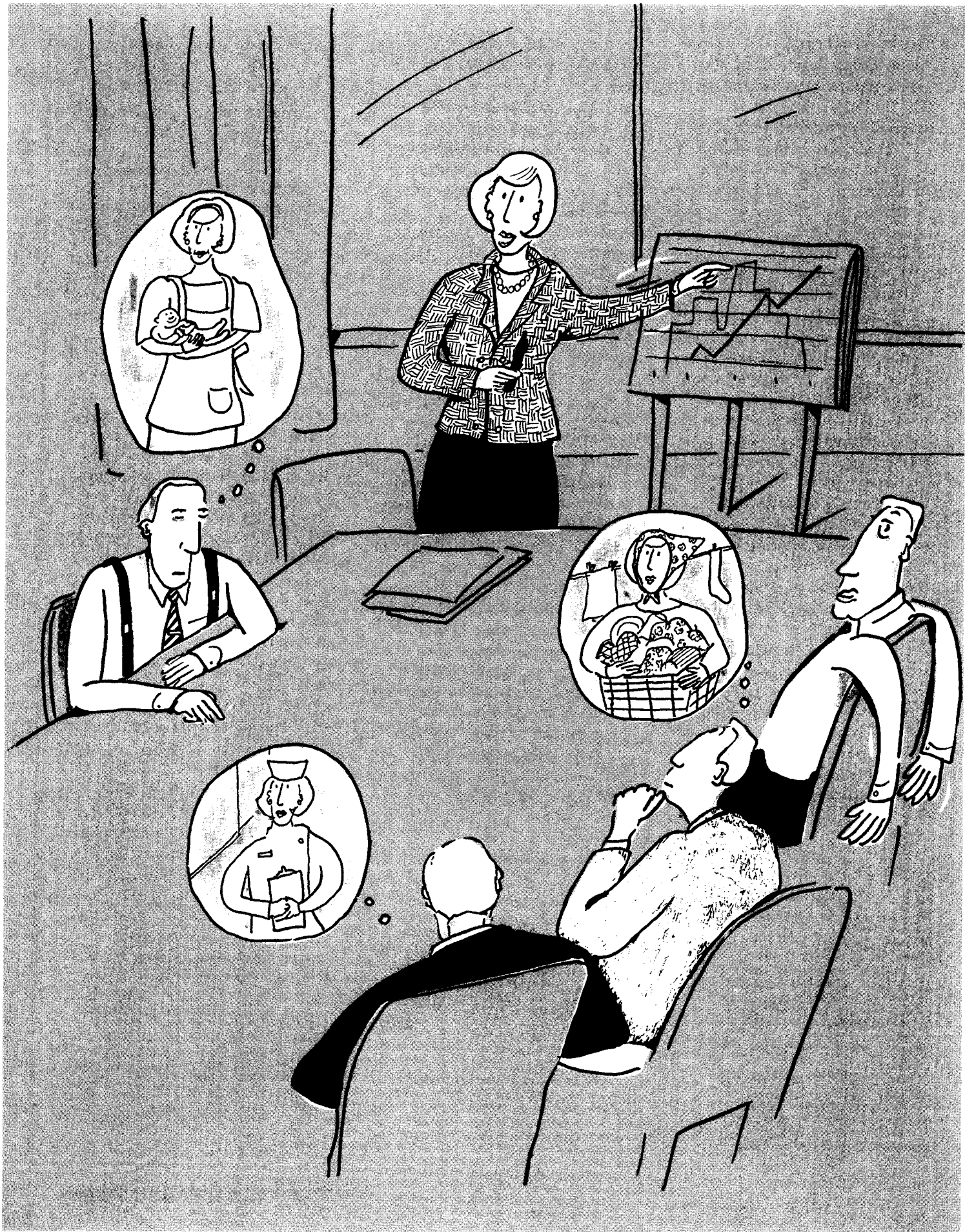
Research has documented a variety of challenges associated with women in the hospitality work force, including the glass ceiling,

<sup>1</sup>C. Bernstein, "Unified Effort Vital to Women's Advancement: Stereotypes Remain Barrier to Executive Suite," *Nation's Restaurant News*, 24, No. 25 (1990), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>J.B. Gregg and P.M. Johnson, "Perceptions of Discrimination Among Women as Managers in Hospitality Organizations," *F.I.U. Hospitality Review*, 8, No. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 10-22.

<sup>3</sup>See: J. Christensen, "Women in Management: Advice to Recent Graduates," *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 (November 1987), pp. 48-49; and C. Walkup, "Women Must Vault Industry Barriers in '90s," *Nation's Restaurant News*, 24, No. 23 (1990), p. 46.

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old-boy networks, sexual harassment, equity in pay and promotions, and quality-of-life issues.<sup>4</sup> The findings suggest that it is particularly difficult for women to gain credibility in male-dominated work environments. Whether breaking in to the old-boy network or advocating a new proposal at a board meeting, women's voices are difficult for many men to hear—both literally and psychologically.

It might be useful for both genders to understand the communication and credibility challenges that women in hospitality confront as they travel the uncertain path to the boardrooms and executive suites. This article reviews some of those challenges and presents a model of cross-gender communication that explains many of them. By examining their listening, speaking, and nonverbal behavior, men and women can make wiser choices about how to present themselves and their ideas.

## An Overview

An overview of the most troublesome situations women report confronting will place the communication guidelines into perspective. Keep in mind that the hospitality work environment itself appears to influence gender-related communication. Employees work closely together, creating what one

research team described as a highly "sexualized" work environment.<sup>5</sup> Shifts are long and irregular, often including evening and nighttime hours. The duties of workers are likely to take them into settings associated with intimate behavior—bedrooms, bars, and lounges. Owing to the nontraditional life-style, work groups are often social groups as well.

Those social groups are often not the same for men and women. Women may have difficulty gaining access to career-relevant information because the old-boy network operates on golf courses and at happy hours as well as in the organization's hallways and cafeterias. That is particularly true in hospitality organizations, where career paths are largely unstructured and career advancement depends heavily on the support of upper-level management.<sup>6</sup> Men have traditionally used informal communication networks to help move ahead. Women in middle-management positions find such contacts less available to them.<sup>7</sup>

My 1992 study of 374 women in middle-level hospitality management ranked "old-boy networks" as the most serious obstacle to their professional development. Next on their list was the lack of women mentors and role models, followed

by quality-of-worklife issues. Problems resulting from perceptions of gender were evident in almost all contexts. One questionnaire response was particularly vivid:

There are no female managers in our organization, but we do have a few assistant managers. A couple of weeks ago several managers were going out to a restaurant that had just opened. When a woman asked the GM why none of the female assistant managers had been asked to go, his response was, "Well, this is business."

The implication is clear—mixed company is considered social. When business is the issue at hand, the club is exclusively male.

Another problem women face as a result of their poor representation in upper-level management is a lack of mentors and role models.<sup>8</sup> New employees have few opportunities to see how successful women handle difficult encounters. And women who have reached senior-level positions may not be actively mentoring. A typical response to a question on mentoring from my survey was, "My female boss doesn't have time to mentor or support me because she has to battle the old-boy network to get where *she* wants to be."

Clearly, we are finding that "women and men with similar educational backgrounds and producing similar products do have different work-related experiences."<sup>9</sup> In fact, gender may itself influence perceptions. One researcher concluded that men and women simply perceive and interpret the same experience in different ways. In a recent study

<sup>4</sup>See, for example: T. Aaron and E. Dry, "Sexual Harassment in the Hospitality Industry," *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 33, No. 2 (April 1992), pp. 93–95; K.E. Campbell, "Gender Differences in Job-Related Networks," *Work and Occupations*, 15, No. 2 (1988), pp. 179–200; M.F. Cook, "Work and Family: Juncture and Disjuncture," *ILR Report*, 25, No. 1 (1987), pp. 5–9; M. DeLuca, "Female Lodging Executives Dealing with Glass Ceiling," *Hotel & Motel Management*, 203, No. 15 (1988), p. 10; S. DeWine and D. Casbolt, "Networking: External Communication Systems for Female Organizational Members," *The Journal of Business Communication*, 20, No. 2 (1983), pp. 57–67; N. diTomaso, "Sexuality in the Workplace: Discrimination and Harassment," in *Sexuality in the Organization*, eds. J. Hearn, G. Burrell, D. Sheppard, and P. Tancred-Sheriff (London: Sage Publications, 1989), pp. 71–90; B. Ettore, "Women at Work: Breaking the Glass, Or Just Window Dressing?," *Management Review*, 8, No. 3 (March 1992), pp. 16–22; B. Gummer, "The Management Careers of Men and Women: Mommy Tracks, Daddy Tracks and 'New Age' Leadership," *Administration in Social Work*, 15, No. 4 (1991), pp. 111–128; and S.A. Lobel, "Allocation of Investment in Work and Family Roles: Alternative Theories and Implications for Research," *Academy of Management Review*, 16, No. 3 (1991), pp. 507–521.

<sup>5</sup>B.A. Gutek, A.G. Cohen, and A.M. Konrad, "Predicting Social-Sexual Behavior at Work: A Contact Hypothesis," *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, No. 3 (1990), pp. 560–577.

<sup>6</sup>J. Peters, "Bridging the Gender Gap: RB Women's Council Challenges the Status Quo," *Restaurant Business*, 87, No. 13 (1988), pp. 115–131.

<sup>7</sup>J. Kagan, "Cracks in the Glass Ceiling: How Women Really Are Faring in Corporate America," *Review of Business*, 8, No. 4 (Spring 1987), pp. 10–12.

<sup>8</sup>See: R.J. Burke and C.A. McKeen, "Mentoring in Organizations: Implications for Women," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 9, No. 4/5 (1990), pp. 317–332; G.F. Dreher and R.A. Ash, "A Comparative Study of Mentoring Among Men and Women in Managerial, Professional, and Technical Positions," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75, No. 59 (1990), pp. 539–546; and J. Peters, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup>J. B. Gregg and P.M. Johnson, p. 12.

Nelsen examined upper-level hospitality managers' perceptions of gender-based differences that affect women's career progress.<sup>10</sup> Her findings are revealing. Men thought that women network in similar ways to men, but women disagreed. Women thought that women are perceived as not being tough enough, and that they rely less on organizational power politics, but men disagreed.

Although perceptions of communication behavior are often confused with actual behavior, our perceptions—as we all know—are our reality. What we believe is what is true for us, and our beliefs influence our attitudes and behavior.

If a man has been raised to believe that women need protection, or that they should take care of social events, or that they are easily upset, those assumptions affect how he treats women at work. The stereotype of a woman as nurturing or sweet may be in sharp contrast to her role requirements—and her behavior—on the job.

As one author points out, a man talking with his co-workers is most often perceived as “making a deal,” while a woman in the same situation may be seen as “gossiping.” While a man with a family picture on his desk is looked on as a responsible community member, a woman with such a picture is thought to be putting her family before her career. Similarly, a man having lunch with the boss looks as if he's on the way up; a woman in the same situation may be suspected of having an affair.<sup>11</sup> Preconceived notions are difficult to overcome unless individuals examine their assumptions about specific communication practices.

<sup>10</sup>B.J. Nelsen, “Perceptions of Sexism in F&B Oriented Corporations,” *Lodging*, 15, No. 5 (1990), pp. 51–52.

<sup>11</sup>N. Josefowitz, *Is This Where I was Going?* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

In addition, different cultures mix gender and business in different ways; the international nature of the modern hospitality work force brings together men and women with different experiences and assumptions. Awkward communication situations are even more likely to develop when expectations are highly discrepant. Those factors can make it particularly difficult for women to establish credibility and respect when conducting business.

### Gaining Credibility

Clearly, credibility has become a key issue for working women. It requires more than just job competence; it also requires character and trustworthiness. The perception of those characteristics arises as much from interpersonal contacts as from job performance. Nine out of ten women in my 1992 study indicated that they had to work harder than their male counterparts for the same outcomes.

One woman voiced a common opinion:

My boss believes that I do the same amount as my male counterpart on the evening shift. In actuality, I do at least 50 percent more. I'm responsible for two meals and all safety training for the hotel. If I complain about that or the fact that my partner treats me with disrespect and is incredibly lazy, I'm labeled “difficult” and “overemotional.”

Another woman said:

Upper-level managers seem to think women have to “prove” themselves in some way.

I work much harder than my male colleagues and often don't get half the recognition.

Over a decade ago Dowling noted that most women in organizations simply do a good job day after day, assuming their work will be recognized and rewarded.<sup>12</sup> They

<sup>12</sup>Claudette Dowling, *The Cinderella Complex* (New York: Summit Books, 1981).

**Women may have difficulty gaining access to career-relevant information because of the old-boy network.**



are wrong. They cannot continue to rely on quiet competence alone. To be successful in the workplace, women must seek, not avoid, professional contact with men. They must implement specific strategies to increase credibility, and they must develop healthy interpersonal relationships with their male colleagues. To facilitate the process, both men and women need to understand gender differences in communication.

To some extent, communication contributes to perceived gender differences just as it creates other organizational realities. It is through interactions with others that individuals learn what it means, within a particular framework, to be male or female. You may have Asian friends, for instance, who grew up in an environment where appropriate behavior for women was strikingly different from what it is in the United States. Consequently, you and your friends may disagree about how women should respond in various situations.

The most productive way to begin redefining what it means to be a woman in the hospitality industry is through examining male and female communication styles. Stereotypical assumptions have to be replaced by realistic images of how professional men and women behave (Exhibit 1). Women must seek opportunities to demonstrate their professional competence; men cannot learn to be comfortable working with women if women isolate themselves from social interaction. In fact, I would propose that the more interaction men and women have

**EXHIBIT 1**  
**Traits associated with male and female stereotypes**

<u>MALE STEREOTYPE</u>	<u>FEMALE STEREOTYPE</u>
Aggressive	Passive
Unemotional	Emotional
Objective	Subjective
Tough minded	Easily influenced
Logical	Illogical
Competitive	Cooperative
Adventurous	Unadventurous
Stoic	Cries easily
Ambitious	Not ambitious
Decisive	Indecisive
Taciturn	Talkative
Blunt	Tactful

as colleagues, the more respect women will gain. But women's communication behavior, and the way it is interpreted, makes all the difference.

Effective communication involves listening carefully and assessing a situation, demonstrating a wide range of communication strategies, and making wise decisions regarding the most appropriate response. Let's look at three aspects of communication—listening, speaking, and nonverbal behavior—and identify some of the most critical gender differences (Exhibit 2).

**Listening**

Individuals who influence their organizations do a great deal of listening. Through effective listening, employees learn the values, assumptions, priorities, and expectations of their colleagues, clients, and guests. In an industry where customer perceptions are critical, listening is a key competence.

Listening is an active process. If you're listening to the wrong things, or distort what you hear, or listen selectively, you will be at a disadvantage. Much attention has been given to determining your

guests' needs. It is also valuable to understand your colleagues' perspectives. It is, in fact, impossible to plan effective communication strategies unless you've assessed your partner's point of view. You need to get to know the people you work with, regardless of their gender.

Women do listen differently from men.<sup>13</sup> Women are more likely to hear emotions and to communicate empathy.

Tannen points out several fundamental gender differences that she attributes primarily to differences in socialization. Whereas women "speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy," men speak and hear a language of "status and independence." Tannen likens communication between the genders to a "cross-cultural" encounter.<sup>14</sup>

When colleagues socialize at lunch, for instance, women are more likely to share their problems and respond with sensitivity to others' concerns.<sup>15</sup> If a female sales manager expresses distress over a lost convention, her counterparts are expected to ask her additional questions and demonstrate their concern with obvious signs of sympathy. A male food and beverage director, however, may express his day's frustrations with expletives, and a description of his misfortunes may be met with jokes or only brief acknowledgment by

<sup>13</sup>D. Borisoff, "Gender Issues and Listening," in *Listening in Everyday Life: A Personal and Professional Approach*, eds. D. Borisoff and M. Purdy (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), pp. 59-86.

<sup>14</sup>D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men In Conversation* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1990), p. 42.

<sup>15</sup>E. Aries, "Verbal and Nonverbal Behavior in Single-Sex and Mixed-Sex Groups," *Psychological Reports*, 51, No. 1 (Aug. 1982), pp. 127-134.

**EXHIBIT 2**  
**Communication Styles**

	<u>LISTENING BEHAVIOR</u>	<u>SPEAKING BEHAVIOR</u>	<u>NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR</u>
Generally high credibility, associated with men	Interrupts	Is loud	Uses broad gestures
	Listens for story line	Has low voice	Touches frequently
	Listens for results, big picture	Is assertive	Takes up a lot of physical space
	Detects deceit	Interrupts	Uses strong eye contact
		Overlaps	Stands close to partner
Generally low credibility, associated with women	Listens for relationships	Uses nonfluencies (halting speech patterns)	Has strong facial expressions
		Hesitates	Smiles frequently
	Listens for feelings	Uses tag questions	Averts eyes

**“Graph” your style and your partner’s style; a comparison of the lines will indicate the degree of communication challenge.**

his male colleagues before they change the subject.

Further, everyone interprets another person’s words according to his or her own concerns, interests, and motives—which may end up as a message quite different from what the speaker intended. A woman who feels that her opinions at management meetings are not taken seriously, for instance, may interpret her male colleagues’ responses as being more negative than they intended. As Tannen explains: “We all want to be heard—but not merely to be heard. We want to be understood—heard for what we think we are saying, for what we know we meant.”<sup>16</sup> Since men and

<sup>16</sup>D. Tannen, p. 48.

women grow up in seemingly different social worlds,<sup>17</sup> the task is a challenging one as women enter boardrooms and lead hospitality management teams.

**Try this.** Listeners of both genders can improve the likelihood of understanding their partners by asking questions and by checking their perceptions. The term “active listening” implies that the listening process takes effort and energy. Active listeners participate in a communication encounter both verbally and nonverbally. They may nod their heads, ask for clarification of a

<sup>17</sup>J.C. Pearson and R.A. Davilla, “The Gender Construct,” in *Women and Men Communicating: Challenges and Changes*, eds. L.P. Arliss and D.J. Borisoff (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 1-13.

point, or paraphrase what they heard to make sure the speaker’s message was correctly interpreted (restating what you hear in your own words is commonly referred to as “reflection”). Most important, listeners must try to see the world from the perspective of the person speaking.

### Speaking

The image of confidence—and the resulting credibility—are developed almost exclusively through communication behavior. Women’s speech differs from men’s in significant ways. Unfortunately, most of the speech characteristics typical of women’s style are those associated with powerlessness in work environments. For instance, women are more likely to use



**When men and women with the same credentials communicate the same message, both men and women give greater credence to men.**

qualifiers, phrases like “I think” or “It seems to me.”<sup>18</sup> Women’s speech is also characterized by tag questions; that is, phrases at the end of sentences that make statements into questions: “I think the three-day-weekend package is the way to market that event, don’t you?”<sup>19</sup> Women speak with more of an upward inflection, which makes statements sound like questions.

Moreover, female voices are generally higher and softer than male voices.<sup>20</sup> Most women have experienced occasions where a man spoke over them, that is, where they started to say something and were overpowered by a male voice. When that happens, the “right moment” can pass, and good ideas may be left unexpressed. Men frequently interrupt women or overlap their speech, starting to say something before the woman has finished talking.<sup>21</sup> For example, a woman is retelling an incident with a guest, and a man who also witnessed the situation breaks in and finishes the story. Such interruptions can be even more frustrating in a formal meeting, where women

strive to make a good impression and want to be heard. Women must become more aware of their speaking style and its potential impact on their credibility.

**Obvious differences.** Men spend much more of their talk time telling stories.<sup>22</sup> The content of their communication, particularly in social groups, tends to be informal and largely impersonal. When you listen closely to men, you are likely to hear incidents retold vividly, and often with enhancements to increase a story’s entertainment value. If the story concerns a recent experience where an irate guest was shouting at them, a man may play up the humorous or external aspects of the event. Women, on the other hand, personalize their messages, often emphasizing the emotional aspects.<sup>23</sup> A woman experiencing and retelling the same situation is likely to focus on how the incident made them feel; they may emphasize their frustration, distress, or concern. The tendency of women to personalize events was repeatedly mentioned by women in middle hospitality management as they described the communication behavior of the women they supervised.<sup>24</sup>

The questionnaire used in my 1992 study asked female managers how the communication of their male and female subordinates differed. Typical responses included:

- Women vocalize their personal problems more than men.
- Women talk about their feelings much more readily than men do.

<sup>18</sup>See: L. Hirschman, “Female-Male Differences in Conversational Interaction,” in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, eds. B. Thorne and N. Henley (Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1975), pp. 242–255; and R. Lakoff, “Language and Woman’s Place,” *Language and Society*, 2 (1975), pp. 45–48.

<sup>19</sup>N. Newcombe and D.B. Arnkoff, “Effects of Speech Style and Sex of Speaker on Person Perception,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, No. 8 (Aug. 1979), pp. 1293–1303.

<sup>20</sup>If you want to know how you come across, just listen to yourself. Put a tape recorder inside your desk drawer, tape your own conversations, and play them back. You may be surprised to find that you’re not nearly as forceful as you thought, or that what you feel is assertiveness comes across to your associates and colleagues as anger or aggression, or that your polite requests to your employees are really definitive commands.

<sup>21</sup>See: B. Eakins and G. Eakins, *Sex Differences in Human Communication* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1978); and D.H. Zimmerman and C. West, “Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation,” in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, eds. B. Thorne and N. Henley (Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1975).

<sup>22</sup>See: J.C. Pearson, *Gender and Communication* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1985); and D. Tannen, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup>D. Tannen, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup>J. Brownell, “Gender and Communication in the Hospitality Industry,” in *Women and Men Communicating: Challenges and Changes*, eds. L.P. Arliss and D.J. Borisoff (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 193–216.

- Women deal with situations on a much more personal and emotional level than men, who are more direct and often seem more confident.

In public forums men also appear more direct and assertive than most women. They use profanity more frequently, and their word choices are perceived as stronger than women's.<sup>25</sup> In professional groups, men almost invariably ask the first question, and they ask more and longer questions than women. In less formal contexts, however, women are more likely to draw out their partners—both male and female—with probing questions.

While women make a statement and then wait for a sign of encouragement and interest, men identify their subject and then simply continue to talk. If a woman says, "I had a lot of trouble with one of my guests last night," she expects her partner to ask, "What happened?" If there is no response, she is likely to feel uncomfortable continuing on with her story. A man, on the other hand, seldom needs the listener to demonstrate any indicators of interest before launching into the entire story. Gender differences regarding a similar tendency, as mentioned earlier, are particularly evident when the speaker is sharing information about a problem. While a woman is likely to follow up what she hears with a question to illustrate her concern, a man is much more apt to acknowledge the speaker briefly and then change the subject.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, when men and women judge each other's behavior according to their own conversational styles, problems are likely to result.

<sup>25</sup>See: C.R. Kramer, "Women's Speech: Separate but Unequal?," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 60, No. 1 (1974), pp. 14–24; and J.H. Frost and W.W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1978).

<sup>26</sup>P. Lunneborg, *Women Changing Work* (New York: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1990).

Studies show that when men and women with the same credentials communicate the same message, men give greater credence to men. What is even more discouraging is that women also give greater credence to men!<sup>27</sup> Consider the implications for women as they negotiate contracts, interpret complicated financial information, or argue in meetings for resources. Both genders must recognize and deal with those reactions before women in hospitality management can enhance their credibility.

Women must believe in themselves and capitalize on their strengths: women are concerned with the quality of relationships and can therefore develop teamwork and morale. Men must understand that a woman's less-forceful style does not imply a lack of competence or conviction. A woman's orientation is more toward "connectedness"; her style is empowering, but not authoritative. As organizations move toward embracing the values that women's styles represent, men will begin fully to appreciate the importance of professional women in hospitality operations.<sup>28</sup>

Learning and practicing new ways of responding do not imply that women or men need to suppress their natural strengths. A woman may develop assertive skills and still be characterized by her sensitivity and quiet manner. Behavioral flexibility is key to effective communication in all organizational settings. Both men and women must expand their communication strategies so they

**Women personalize their messages, often emphasizing the emotional aspects and focusing on how they feel.**

<sup>27</sup>S.B. Kenton, "Speaker Credibility in Persuasive Business Communication: A Model which Explains Gender Differences," *The Journal of Business Communication*, 26, No. 2 (1989), pp. 143–156.

<sup>28</sup>See: G.N. Powell, *Women and Men in Management* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988); and "Ways Men and Women Lead," in *Harvard Business Review's* "Debate" column, January-February 1991, pp. 150–160.

**If women are to succeed—  
if they are to be role models  
and mentors—they must  
examine their communication  
behavior and develop  
confidence in their abilities.**

can be effective under a wide range of circumstances. There are many ways to accomplish a goal, and adjusting your communication behavior will change the way others respond to you.

**Try this.** If you think you communicate well, but you aren't getting the response you want, modify your communication. Consider the way your partner views the world and try another approach. Women, for instance, have often been advised to develop assertive skills that require them to speak more forcefully and directly. These are worth practicing. A note of caution, however, is that some women who feel uncomfortable with this style are likely to go overboard and become too aggressive.

The ability to self-monitor—to assess accurately the impact your behavior has on others—is essential to successful behavior change.

### **Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication also contributes to one's professional image and, subsequently, the way others respond. Individuals send messages through their appearance, office furnishings, gestures and posture, facial expressions, use of eye contact, use of touch, and possessions. The expression, "You cannot not communicate" is, indeed, true. (Do you know what kind of nonverbal image you project? If you looked into a mirror at this moment, do you know what image you would see?)

Although a wide range of gender differences exists in verbal communication, nonverbal differences are even more striking. For instance, by assuming a more relaxed posture—often leaning back and sitting in an open-leg position—men generally take up more space, thereby communicating higher status and greater

sense of control over their environment.<sup>29</sup>

**Try this.** Pay attention to the manner in which your colleagues sit, how they gesture, and how they use the space they occupy. Notice, too, the pictures of business travelers on the pages of hotel-company brochures. Nonverbally, men and women can appear to be communicating in different languages.

**Eye to eye.** In face-to-face encounters women use much more eye contact than men. Yet women avert their gaze more often, especially when communicating with a man or someone of higher status.<sup>30</sup> That behavior can be interpreted as a lack of self confidence. Generally, however, women value eye contact more than men and are more affected by a lack of it in conversations. Women also use more facial expression and are better at conveying and interpreting emotions. They smile more frequently and are more attracted to others who smile.<sup>31</sup> A good place to observe those differences is at the front desk, where there is almost constant interaction among men and women.

Individuals' nonverbal communication is often unintentional, as illustrated here:

Mike hardly realizes that he is communicating status and power to Beth as he leans back in his chair, hands locked behind his head. She is unaware that she is fidgeting with her bracelet as she

<sup>29</sup>J.C. Pearson, *Gender and Communication* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1991); and E. Aries, pp. 127–134.

<sup>30</sup>K. Dierks-Stewart, "Sex Differences in Nonverbal Communication: An Alternative Perspective," in *Communication, Language and Sex: Proceedings of the First Conference*, eds. C.L. Berryman and V.A. Eman (Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, 1979), pp. 112–121.

<sup>31</sup>See: S.J. Frances, "Sex Differences in Nonverbal Behavior," *Sex Roles*, 5, No. 4 (August 1979), pp. 519–535; and S. Lau, "The Effect of Smiling on Person Perception," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 117, No. 1 (June 1982), pp. 63–67.

sits leaning forward, legs crossed. As Mike speaks in his deep, resonant voice, Beth focuses on him but frequently averts her eyes.

Anyone entering the office would assume that Mike's status is higher than Beth's. But is it? Or is it just that Beth's nonverbal behavior communicates less confidence and credibility?

There are many men and women who pay little attention to those nonverbal behaviors that give clues to the speaker's feelings and attitudes. Effective communicators, however, learn to detect and interpret those cues that contradict a speaker's words.

For women as well as men, stating ideas clearly and forcefully even if their partner's nonverbal behavior indicates disagreement or lack of approval will, in the long run, increase their credibility on the job.

**Try this.** Perhaps the most important and powerful aspect of nonverbal communication is eye contact. Both men and women can influence the quality of their communication by the degree of eye contact they maintain. Keeping a balance, however, is key: either too much or too little eye contact can lead to perceptions of mistrust, insecurity, or incompetence. Moreover, since norms regarding appropriate eye contact vary from culture to culture, it is particularly important to take into account the specific listener and situation. In general, make sure that your eye contact is appropriately strong, but not intimidating.

## Improving Communication

The first step to improving communication is listening carefully and trying to understand how your partner sees the world. Although women may be perceived as less capable than men, they are in a good position to change that

perception. By monitoring their verbal and nonverbal communication and choosing behavior that projects professionalism and competence, women can influence their colleagues' perceptions.

Men must also become more aware of their communication behavior and its impact on female colleagues and choose responses that will facilitate an open exchange of ideas. As more women enter the work force it becomes increasingly important for men to do their part to accommodate gender differences so that the unique contributions of all employees can be recognized. Talented women who are frustrated by what they perceive as a male-dominated environment are likely to take their talents elsewhere.

Women have entered an arena where the rewards have never been based on competence and hard work alone. Strategies of personal relationships (e.g., the old-boy network), which still frequently characterize the male mode of operation, depend on perceptions formed by social contacts as well as by job performance.

Maybe it will always be that way. Individuals work together, form friendships, and create alliances—and in the process get their tasks accomplished.

If women are to succeed—if they are to break in to the male networks and be role models and mentors—they must examine their communication behavior and develop confidence in their abilities. They must tell their own stories to new employees, stories that reinforce positive images of successful women and that highlight the value of women's ways of managing and interacting. Women have to choose symbols, both verbal and nonverbal, that represent their vision of what relationships between men and women

should be like. Through deliberate actions, words, and symbolic behavior, men and women can create a workplace characterized by respect and understanding. The self confidence that effective communication instills will further contribute to impressions of credibility.

Although women need to support each other in their efforts to develop personally and professionally, they must recognize that support groups usually occur on the sidelines. The playing field is full of men, and the most successful women will seek rather than avoid opportunities to interact with them. Only through those interactions can women change the stereotypes and perceptions that may interfere with their professional development.

Recall George Bernard Shaw's character Liza Doolittle, in the story *Pygmalion*, and her transformation from uneducated urchin to well-mannered woman. At one point Liza expresses her frustration, saying: "I'll always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he treats me like a flower girl." Those like Colonel Pickering who treat her as a lady, however, empower her to rise above the common stereotypes and realize her ambitions.

The goal of all women in hospitality management is to be treated with respect. By monitoring their communication practices and by thinking more strategically about communication in the workplace, women can present their ideas with greater impact and express their values with greater confidence. By acknowledging and understanding socialized communication differences, men can support women as they join in the organization's informal networks and move comfortably into senior-level management positions. **CQ**