

Evolving Gender Communication Issues in E-Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about gender differences in communication. Gender stereotypes propose that men communicate in a direct manner and focus on information; women communicate in an indirect manner and focus on relationships. Tannen (1995) suggests that gender differences in communication contribute to the “glass ceiling.” Further, Eubanks (2000) noted that the Internet and the World Wide Web are actively and aggressively hostile to women. Such discourse fosters gender stereotypes of the past and paints a gloomy picture for women with regard to participation and success in the realm of workplace e-collaboration.

However, I propose that e-collaboration provides a medium with the potential to allow women to work outside the realm of traditional gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are not an accurate reflection of reality, for both women and men have a wide array of communication styles. Activation of gender stereotypes constrains rather than facilitates communication. Face-to-face communication is rich with cues that activate gender stereotypes. Women can benefit from opportunities in the workplace to operate free from the restrictions placed upon them by gender stereotypes, and to further develop their communication competence.

My argument rests on two premises. First, e-collaboration offers a means through which women can communicate with men without being encumbered by many of the usual social trappings that activate gender stereotypes. It also offers opportunities for mindful articulation of ideas, expanded access to organizational members, clear tracking of idea generation, all of which increase one’s opportunities to be heard.

Second, the growing presence of women in traditionally male workplace roles, as well as in cyberspace, is changing workplace culture and the norms of the past. Women and men continue to learn from one another and expand their competence and comfort in a variety

of roles. This article will outline relevant theory and statistics that support both arguments.

BACKGROUND

Social Presence and Media Richness Theories

Social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) proposes a one-dimensional continuum of social presence that reflects the degree of awareness of the other person in a communication interaction. Text-based communication anchors the low end of this continuum, and face-to-face communication anchors the high end. This theory posits communication will be most effective when the level of social presence is appropriate for the interpersonal involvement requirements of the task.

Daft and Lengel’s (1986) media richness theory places media upon a continuum with regard to capacity to provide rapid feedback, convey non-verbal cues and personality, and support the use of natural language. They suggest that media should be selected as appropriate for the need to reduce ambiguity in collaborative tasks, and that face-to-face communication is the most effective for reducing discussion ambiguity.

Both theories suggest the degree of social presence or media richness should be matched to the situation at hand. Face-to-face communication is not always ideal, and has some negative aspects. It carries both financial and emotional costs, as people travel to be together and wait for one another, and succumb to the need for small talk to establish rapport. Face-to-face communications require time-consuming meetings and can create interruptions to work accomplishment. Because face-to-face communication can decrease effective use of time in the workplace, people actually seek to avoid it at times (Nardi & Whittaker, 2002).

They close office doors, choose to work offsite, and opt for lean electronic communication.

Gender Stereotypes in Communication

Gender stereotypes are associated with societal roles, which have spilled over into work roles. The workplace and its rules were forged by men and for men (Connell, 1995). Men assumed positions of power; they were bosses, problem solvers, good with numbers and technology; they looked to one another for ideas and innovation; efficiency and productivity became the basis of success. Accordingly, workplace communication norms highlight the importance of technical and informational exchange, as well as the importance of direct communication. These norms continue to play an important role in effective task accomplishment, and they continue to be associated with men.

Much of what is written on communication gender stereotypes is closely linked to social role stereotypes. For example, Simon and Pederson (2005) provide an overview of communication styles that limits women to cooperative, intuitive, relational and feeling communications, and attributes to men the workplace necessary communications of asserting information with a focus on intellect/facts/reason/logic/order/structure. Similarly, Herring (1994) notes that women and men use language differently; women use apologies, questions, and supportive language; men use strong assertions, self-promotion, and challenges.

However, if women were limited to relational communications at work they could never accomplish their tasks successfully. Information-focused communication is not simply the domain of men; women are both comfortable and competent in this domain. In fact, recent evidence suggests that when men and women share the same role or the same task, and have the same status, both genders adopt similar communication strategies (Basow, 2004).

When dealing with stereotypes, it's important to remember that there is greater variance in behavior within any given group than there is between groups. Thus, some men communicate in a manner more consistent with female stereotypes (Tannen, 1996), and some women communicate in a manner that's more consistent with male stereotypes. Tannen (1994) prefaces her book *Talking from 9 to 5* by recognizing that although she presents gender-stereotypical patterns of communication, each individual's style is unique and

shaped by their personal history. "Patterns I describe are always a matter of degree, of a range on a continuum, not of absolute difference" (Tannen, 1996, p. 13). Thus, stereotypes oversimplify and potentially misrepresent reality; they can bring to bear in any situation inappropriate assumptions and conclusions.

Stereotype Activation

Gender communication stereotypes are deeply held and widely accepted. Stereotypes simplify cognitive processing by simplifying our world. As noted, stereotypes consist of generalizations that may or may not be situationally accurate. Yet once evoked, these generalizations constrain how communication is perceived and interpreted. When the receiver of communication has active generalizations that are not accurate, their cognitive processing of the communication will likely distort the content and tenor of the communicator's message.

Rich media offer high social presence and richness, and contain visual and auditory cues that are likely to cognitively engage stereotypes. Tannen (1994) discusses the variety of ways in which women are "marked," which range from clothing and makeup choices to surname choices. These markers become social cues, from which attributions are made. The mere physical image of a woman thereby communicates a variety of messages and distractions to anyone in her presence. Attributions are made about her before she has a chance to speak, and these attributions impact how her communications are received. To complicate matters, women are expected to exhibit normative behavior, and those who violate stereotypical norms often face negative consequences (Heilman, 2001)

Communication that occurs without evoking gender stereotypes is less bound by the constraints and potential distortion of gender stereotypes and attributions. Text-based media offer low social presence and richness, and thereby contain fewer social cues that activate gender stereotypes. When stereotypes are not activated, the communication sent by women is more likely to be accepted at face value, rather than filtered through a gender screen. Thus, women are likely to find that the use of lean media in e-collaboration can free them from the stereotypical gender roles. For example, when stereotypes are active, men who expect women to be submissive might be offended by assertive communication from a woman. But when assertive text is

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