

# Gender Journal: Men & Women Working Together

Newsletter from the Scottsdale National Gender Institute

<http://www.gendertraining.com>

January/February 2010

## **The Value of Feminine Speech in the Workplace**

**A little walk down memory lane:** During the years between 1940 and 1945, six million women entered the U.S. workforce which according to C.E. Harrison (University of Berkeley Press, 1988) was a 500% increase of the number of women in paid labor. The world wars were the major contributing factors. They were needed to keep the economy going and their households afloat. And thus began the “love-hate relationship” between the place of women in the workforce and the “moral” backlash of a woman’s place within the social order.

The sixties heralded in the acclaimed book The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedman galvanizing the women’s movement as it “exposes” the dissatisfaction many women experienced as a result of narrowly defined roles. The National Organization of Women (NOW) was also founded by Friedman during this decade. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act bars employment discrimination against race and sex and at the same time establishes the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Equal Rights Amendment is passed in 1972 and 1973 the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision gives a woman the right to determine her own reproductive choices legalizing early stage abortion. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 paved the way for 12 weeks of employer support for family emergencies including childbirth; it was upheld in 2003. In 1996, women break the military academy barrier and win the right to be admitted.

Subsequent years have brought a variety of “wins” and continued struggles on individual and collective fronts to increase, improve and invigorate a woman’s place in the male dominated workplace. Under the current administration, President Obama passed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act, giving women the opportunity to file a discrimination complaint against an employer within 180 days of their last paycheck. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, in 2008 women made up about 48 percent of the labor force and men 52 percent. The U.S. Small Business Administration website reports, America's 9.1 million women-owned businesses employ 27.5 million people and contribute \$3.6 trillion to the economy. This incredible journey of women’s rights into the workplace revisits the once popular women’s cigarette advertisement, “We’ve come a long way baby”, but have we?

At what cost have women become major players in the male-dominated workplace? What exactly have they gained? Or maybe a better question is what have women bought to the workplace that distinguishes them as workers and leaders from their male counterparts? Women have entered the workforce in mass numbers physically but their mental and expressive ways of communicating have not been welcomed in most environments. For many women, the rise to the c-suite has come with a dismantling of the feminine nature of thinking, listening, communicating, resolving conflict - behaving. Masculine norms of thinking, speaking, and doing

business, pervade the workplace. Julia T. Wood in her book Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture (2009), researches and writes about the myriad of problems women face due to the “institutionalization” of *male-behavior* in the workforce. In the chapter “Gendered Organizational Communication”, Wood speaks of a variety of factors that perpetuate male-dominated workplace environments. These factors include: “Think manager – think male”, “linear, analytical models of communication”, “perpetuated stereotypes of men and women” as well as “formal and informal workplace practices” that hamper women’s progress often leading to the proverbial “glass ceiling and walls”. For the rest of this discussion, I will focus specifically on the question of communication and the significance of *feminine speech* – its value and devaluing in the workplace.

Communication, gender and culture are inextricably tied. Individuals are socialized into their gender roles based on their male/female marker. The socialization process of masculine versus feminine, based in cultural norms, produces communication that is *genderized*. So, men engage in masculine speech and women engage in feminine speech, IF they have followed prescribed patterns of communication behavior. The workforce, historically dominated by men, has been infused with masculine speech patterns that have become the “norm” of communication behavior.

Think about the way in which men are socialized to communicate. You may recognize socialization patterns such as: straight-forward (linear), problem-solution oriented, report oriented, activity dominated, control focused, and independent. Females are enculturated to use communication for a dissimilar social role, which initially did not include the workforce: relationship talk (rapport building), circular communication (descriptive/expressive), nurturing, supportive, egalitarian, interdependent and conflict managing. As evidenced in the communication climate of most workplaces, masculine speech has been encouraged and feminine speech discouraged. The individualistic, competitive and aggressive manner of U.S. business relations has often been regarded as needing communication behavior that is assertive, controlling and hyper-individualistic. Feminine speech is not the typical pattern of doing business. However, maybe it is time to rethink our current way of conducting business. Why?

The United States is experiencing unprecedented “lose of face” not only with the global community, but its own citizens. The current economic crisis and resultant fallout can be traced back to long-held patterns of “business as usual” that valued individual interests over the collective good of the society. Insider trading, personal greed, ponzi schemes, monopolization, corporate takeovers, immediate gratification, insurance and bank fraud/failures, and the list goes on. Could a corporate climate of feminine speech create a different way of doing business? If we examine patterns of global business negotiations, most are based on building relationships and negotiation/pacing that requires a more circular manner of communicating. Maybe it is the feminine speak that will carry us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the global business market. Could feminine speech help create communication climates of *co-opetition* - building teams where members bring their individual best for the collective good (P.S. Perkins, *The Art and Science of Communication*, 2008)?

The new global business model is about building relationships of trust and mutual benefit. These are characteristics inherent in feminine speech communities. Maybe its time for a new model; maybe its time for women to speak up!

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