

ACTION POINT DEFINITIONS



LESSONS OF CHILDHOOD

From the moment of birth, boys and girls are treated differently. Boys and girls are taught to play different games. Unlike girls, boys learn how to be aggressive, how to deal with conflict and competition, how to win and lose, how to be leaders and how to take risks. Girls learn how to be nice, how to avoid conflicts, how to build and preserve relationships, how to avoid risks, and how to be fair to all.



HIERARCHY vs. FLAT-STRUCTURE

Men live in hierarchical structures learned from sports played in childhood. Women prefer flatter structures which promote better communication, understanding and friendship.

“POWER DEAD-EVEN”

A very important rule in the female culture is that the power in interpersonal relationships is shared and always kept “dead-even”. Have you ever heard of a “boss” doll player? The girls who tried to be the boss of other girls as children quickly learned that this behavior damaged friendships. Consequently, when adult women enter a hierarchical arena they usually attempt to share power equally or flatten the hierarchy. As a result, women often negotiate differences, seeking “win-win” solutions, focusing on what is fair for all instead of winning.

One of the hitches with the power dead-even rule, however, is that work is usually played by the hierarchical rules of team sports, and what seems “fair,” might not always be the best way to run a business.



PROCESS FOCUS vs. GOAL FOCUS

When tackling a problem, a man often sorts through all of his options internally before offering a solution. (To verbalize his thoughts and uncertainty before he has reached a solution could jeopardize a man’s position in the hierarchy.) Men also tend to have goal-focused mindsets that result in the need to immediately “fix” or “kill” problems or issues: the desire to reach the goals as quickly as possible.

Women, on the other hand, often process issues externally by gathering input from co-workers, friends or family before reaching a solution. A woman who is used to a “flat” structure does not think she will “lose” anything by soliciting input from outside sources. Goal achievement is just as important to women, but how women get there is different.

LINEAR vs. MULTIPLE FOCUS

Men usually lead linear lives: they get out of school, go to work and retire after 30 years. Women tend to live “more lives”, with multiple areas of focus: they graduate school, go to work, pull out and have children, go back to work, get involved in the community, join the PTA, etc. — all of these activities are simultaneously important. Unlike women who are often juggling many things at one time, men seem to perform better when they tackle just one task at a time, and often see women who are “multi-task” oriented as “unfocused”. Men who perform tasks in a linear or sequential manner may be deemed “not as effective” by their female managers.

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TALKING IT OVER vs. GIVING THE ANSWER

Women most often talk through the thought process behind their decisions before giving their “bottom line” answer. Men who are not interested in “the process” accuse women of being overly talkative. Men prefer to give the bottom line answer and will “back fill” the process leading to the decision if they are asked.



LEADERSHIP

Good leaders are those who are able to flex their style based on the needs of the follower. Unfortunately both men and women often end up on “automatic pilot” using the style that is most comfortable or familiar rather than what will be most effective with each follower.

COMMAND AND CONTROL vs. INVOLVEMENT

In a hierarchy, the leadership style that works most effectively is command and control. Control of the game is given to a “coach” who defines a problem and then issues a command to “kill” the problem. Questioning the coach’s motives or tactics is often considered an act of insubordination. The coach’s job is to keep the team focused on the goal line, to conquer problems rather than “discuss” them. This style works most effectively in time-bound or emergency situations and when there are no other alternatives. The down side of command and control is that team members are taught to accept commands they don’t necessarily like and obey them without question; interpersonal relationships are relegated to the sidelines.

In a flat structure, the leadership style at work is involvement. Female managers are more likely to “share” power with others, involving them in the problem-solving and decision-making processes. On the plus side, involvement promotes creativity and provides psychological “buy-in” when it takes other people to get the job done. The down side, however, is that women who lead through involvement might be viewed as weak and ineffectual by male counterparts and employees who are more accustomed to “taking orders from above”.



BEING A TEAM PLAYER

When asked “Are you a team player?” men and women who answer “yes” are often responding from two very different perspectives. For most men, being a good team player means knowing your position in the hierarchy and playing your slot well, without question. Women, on the other hand, tend to believe that being a good team player means helping out anybody you can on a flat or even playing field. These two divergent viewpoints often result in men seeing the way women approach situations as manipulative, while women may find the way men approach situations as mindless (“he’s just following orders”).

FRIENDLINESS vs. FRIENDSHIP

For women, friendships are relationships that are not bound by place or time. A friend is a friend is a friend — period. Men in the work setting are more likely to engage in “friendliness.” Unlike friendship, friendliness translates into being loyal to whatever team you happen to be playing on at the moment. And while attacking a co-worker’s ideas during a meeting is viewed by many men as simply part of the “game”, for many women it seems to be a betrayal of friendship.

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MEETINGS: HOW WE PLAY THEM DIFFERENTLY

Meeting "etiquette" is probably one of the most problematic areas for men and women in the workplace. Men, more likely to resist being influenced in public, tend to get all of their "ducks lined up" in advance of a scheduled meeting. For many men in business, the "real" meeting happens before the meeting, during breaks at the meeting, or after the meeting, but not during the meeting. Women, on the other hand, tend to have their meetings during the meeting. When a woman brings up a new subject for the first time at a meeting she is not trying to "blind-side" a male co-worker, but simply doing the meeting at the meeting.

Men and women play meetings differently. A man who strongly believes in his ideas is likely to speak at length and dominate meetings by discussing those ideas. A man tends to use a declamatory voice, making statements such as "Obviously, the best way to do this is...", and he will also be more likely to interrupt another speaker (boys at play tend to "climb all over each other" verbally).

Conversely, women often speak briefly, wait their turn, and share the floor: Women are also apt to phrase their ideas as questions: "Don't you think it would be a good idea if...?" Finally, women tend to smile more in meetings. Unlike men, who resist being influenced in public, women are often seen as "easier to sway," their smiles invariably mistaken for assent. (If a woman had something different on her mind, other team members may not solicit it from her because her smile says she has "bought in.")



"THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT": THE DIFFERENT RULES OF TALK

Although boys and girls grow up in the same families and sit in the same classrooms we learn different lessons about the "appropriate" ways to communicate. As a result, we often misread what the other gender is really saying.

MAKING IT UP vs. GOING INTO THE CONFESSIONAL

When asked how they would do a project, solve a problem, or perform some other work-related activity, men have a tendency to say "The best thing to do is X'." Even if he is not really sure, a male will simply give it his best shot. Women are more apt to say "I'm not really sure, but my best guess is X." To men, it boils down to "taking a risk based on what I know;" for women it is a matter of honesty — "I'm not going to tell you I can do it unless I am certain I can do it."

TALKING SUCCESS AND FAILURE-POINTING FINGER IN/OUT

Research shows that men and women often talk about success and failure in different terms. When men succeed, they are likely to attribute success to intrinsic factors (i.e. skills, talents, etc.) Failures occur for reasons that are usually "beyond their control" like "the computer fouled up," or "I didn't get the information I needed." When talking about success a man claims it for himself: "Hey, my idea worked!" Women are just the opposite, often attributing their successes to outside factors such as effort, task ease or just plain luck: "I tried really hard...It wasn't that hard to begin with...I was really lucky," etc. A woman is also more likely to take personal ownership for failures: "I really messed up on that one..."

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THE LANGUAGE OF INVOLVEMENT

Linguistically, women often use language structures called hedges, disclaimers and tag questions. Hedges include words and phrases like “maybe,” “perhaps,” or “I *kind of* have a problem with this report,” and “I *sort of* thought we could start now.” Disclaimers begin sentences, “I may be wrong, but...”, while tag questions appear at the end: “I think this is the best way to do it, *don’t you?*” Men often tend to view women who speak this way as being insecure about themselves or unsure of their ideas. But these language structures are very functional in the female culture: they flatten the hierarchy and emphasize involvement, both of which are very important communication devices used by women when dealing with other women in a work setting. (A female manager is more likely to get the results she wants by involving a woman employee in the decision-making process, than by issuing a directive or command.)

VERBAL BANTERING

Linguistically, men tend to engage in verbal bantering or teasing (bantering can also take “non-verbal forms, i.e.. practical jokes); whether verbal or non-verbal, the message is the same: “Hey, I may be vying for position in the hierarchy, but I like you.” For example, a man can tell another man he “looks like he slept in his clothes”, and that other guy will find an equally humorous or insulting comeback without batting an eye. If one female co-worker said that same thing to another, it would most likely damage their relationship. Women often perceive verbal bantering as cruel or insulting; for men, it is really just a way to “bond with the other guys”.

WHAT YOU DON'T SAY

There is a vast difference between men and women in terms of sensitivity to non-verbal cues. Men, for example, are less likely to see and accurately read facial expressions, and may not understand a woman who engages in “face work” as a means of communicating her feelings. There are a variety of non-verbal cues that are misconstrued by men and women at work: women prefer facing other people when interacting, which might appear overly aggressive to men who use this form of communication to square off during fights; and men, who prefer to stand shoulder-to-shoulder during relaxed verbal exchanges, can seem disinterested to women. Even something as simple as a smile or a nod of the head can be misread. Women nod when listening to someone as a way of telling that person “I hear what you’re saying.” Men, on the other hand, nod in agreement.



CONCLUSION: CHOPSTICKS vs. SILVERWARE

The customs of the culture you grow up in are obviously the “right” customs to follow. If you grow up eating with silverware, you’ll find it looks weird the first time you watch people eating with chopsticks. On the flip side, when people accustomed to chopsticks watch people “stabbing and sawing” their food with silverware, that seems strange. It’s just a matter of what seems usual to you. Correct behavior and communication depends on understanding the culture of your gender and that of the opposite sex as well.