

DIVERSITY NEWS

February 2006

Yvonne: Men and women are different...

Thomas: No doubt about it! And those differences are just as obvious at work as they are anywhere else!

Yvonne: In addition to OBVIOUS differences, men and women differ in ways that may not be readily apparent, but which affect employees' abilities to work together successfully.

Thomas: In this edition of Diversity News, we'll talk about some of the "challenges" which arise as a result of gender differences in the workplace.

Yvonne: We'll also suggest some methods of addressing those "challenges" in order to improve working relationships and increase productivity.

Thomas: After that, we'll check the diversity calendar for important events and observances in February.

Yvonne: From a very early age, boys are encouraged to compete, and girls are encouraged to cooperate. Little wonder then that, as adults, men and women behave differently, even at work. It's almost as if they have come from different planets.

In his book "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus", author John Gray discusses gender differences in values, stresses, motivation, intimacy, emotions, conflict management, showing appreciation, and obtaining support— differences which can contribute to problems in communication.

In his more recent book, "Mars and Venus in the Workplace", Dr. Gray analyzes the differences in how men and women communicate, solve problems, react to stress, earn respect, promote themselves, experience emotional support, minimize conflict, score points, and ask for what they want.

While describing the many ways men and women misunderstand and misinterpret one another in the workplace, Dr. Gray also offers practical advice on reducing unnecessary conflict and frustration.

Thomas: In addition to Dr. Gray's work, books by other authors have pointed out significant differences in the behaviors of men and women at work.

For example: [*pause*] In her book "Talking from 9 to 5", [*pause*] Deborah Tannen, [*pause*] author of the books, "You Just Don't Understand" and "That's Not What I

Meant”, writes about how women’s and men’s conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work.

And in the book “Genderflex: Men and Women Speaking Each Other’s Language at Work”, Judith Tingley writes about how men and women can adapt to one another’s differences in order to improve the quality and efficiency of daily interactions.

Both Dr. Tannen and Dr. Tingley recommend that men and women become more aware of other conversational styles and develop more flexibility in their own conversational habits. AND, adjust their expectations!

Yvonne: The ways in which men and women communicate differ in terms of content, structure, and style.

Thomas: In terms of content (that is, WHAT people talk about), men prefer to talk about THINGS, like sports, business, food, money, and sex. Women, on the other hand, prefer to talk about PEOPLE, feelings, and relationships.

Yvonne: In terms of structure (that is, how people USE words), men typically avoid long explanations and quickly get to the point. Women, on the other hand, tend to be more descriptive. Interestingly enough, research has shown that men actually TALK more than women; and women LISTEN more than men.

Thomas: In terms of style, there are several differences in the way men and women communicate. For example, men are more GOAL-oriented (that is, focused on solving problems), and women are more PROCESS-oriented (that is, focused on understanding themselves, other people, and the world around them).

Yvonne: In addition, men are more COMPETITIVE in conversation, attempting to sound confident and persuasive, and willing to interrupt other speakers. Women, on the other hand, are more CONCILIATORY, that is, more willing to share power and to seek compromise.

Thomas: In addition to the differences in their VERBAL communication, men and women differ in their NONVERBAL communication.

Yvonne: For example, men take up more space! Men will stride across a room or a stage while they talk, or stand with their feet wide apart, and make sweeping gestures. In contrast, women tend to stand in one place and compact themselves, keeping their legs closer together and their arms nearer their bodies.

Thomas: In conversation, two women are more likely to face one another while they’re talking. Two men, on the other hand, are more likely to stand side-by-side, facing forward instead of each other.

Yvonne: Men and women also use TOUCH in different ways: Women use touch as a way to connect or to build rapport; men use touch to convey status or power.

Thomas: And men and women have different approaches to handling stress and solving problems: For example, men tend to WITHDRAW from others; women, however, tend to REACH OUT, that is, they seek the perspective or advice of others.

Thomas: Men and women don't just TALK differently, they LISTEN differently. Women's listening, like their speaking, is process-oriented: They listen to understand. Women notice details in a speaker's demeanor, expression, and tone, and they tend to pick up both the literal and interpretive content of a message. And women RESPOND to the emotional content of a message. In addition to making good eye contact, women also are expressive with their faces: They tend to nod and smile in encouragement while listening.

For men, listening (like speaking) is goal-oriented: That is, men listen to hear if a message requires some response or action from them. If not, they tend to tune out. Men often ignore the emotional content of a message and respond only to the literal message. Also, men mask their facial expressions when listening, giving few cues to their listening process.

Simply knowing that men and women LISTEN differently isn't enough to enhance communication at work. Men and women need to work at IMPROVING their listening skills. For example, men need to increase their ability to hear the entire meaning of a message; and women need to decrease their tendency to take messages too personally.

There are several things that you can do to become a more responsive listener:

First of all, acknowledge the speaker by using simple verbal responses, such as "uh huh" or "OK." This lets the speaker know that you're listening and encourages him or her to keep talking.

Secondly, paraphrase what the speaker said: That is, repeat the literal content of the message in your own words. This demonstrates to the speaker that you understand what he or she is saying.

Thirdly, listen for the emotions underlying the speaker's statements, and then let the speaker know that you heard the message and that you understand how he or she feels about it.

Yvonne: One serious issue that arises from gender differences in the workplace is the potential for sexual harassment: that is, unwelcome and unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Examples of VERBAL sexual harassment include sexual innuendoes, suggestive remarks, insults, humor, and jokes about sex or gender-specific traits, sexual propositions, and threats.

Examples of NON-VERBAL sexual harassment include suggestive or insulting sounds, leering, whistling, obscene gestures, and obscene or graphic materials.

Examples of PHYSICAL sexual harassment include touching or cornering.

There are appropriate ways to deal with sexual harassment:

Telling the harasser the behavior is unwelcome and you want it to stop.

Keeping a journal or record of events and dates of occurrences.

Reporting incidents to your supervisor, to management, or to an EEO officer.

Or utilizing other resources such as grievance processes and informal and formal EEO processes.

Thomas: The VA Learning University offers several online courses on sexual harassment:

“Sexual Harassment Awareness for Employees” addresses the elements that identify behavior as sexual harassment.

“Workplace Harassment” deals with issues of inappropriate workplace behavior and how to confront such matters.

“Sexual Harassment in the Workplace” introduces HR professionals to the many aspects of sexual harassment, the key types of sexual harassment claims, the recent legal history of sexual harassment, and important elements of an effective sexual harassment prevention program.

“Sexual Harassment Training for Human Resource Professionals” introduces the legal criteria that can help employees recognize when sexual harassment has occurred.

And “Dealing with Sexual Harassment Claims” introduces techniques for investigating, documenting, and presenting findings from sexual harassment claims.

Yvonne: The VA Learning University also offers several courses on effective listening and communication skills. For example:

“The Basics of Listening” reviews the factors that influence communication and listening, and suggests strategies to overcome weak listening skills.

“Enhancing Your Listening Skills” describes the skills needed to understand what people say, and what they DON’T say!

“Listening for Comprehension” also teaches how to comprehend verbal and nonverbal messages.

“Listening for Higher Purposes” teaches how to listen more effectively for critical and empathic purposes in order to maximize understanding.

“Communication Skills for the Workplace” describes techniques to speak assertively, give and receive constructive criticism, and question effectively.

“The Mechanics of Effective Communication” provides strategies for improving listening skills and reading “body language.”

And “Building Effective Inter-Gender Relationships” explains the differences in the language and communication behavior of men and women.

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Thomas: In the diversity calendar this month, February is Black History Month. This year’s theme is “Celebrating Community: A Tribute to Black Fraternal, Social, and Civic Institutions.”

Yvonne: Also in February, *CAREERS & the disABLED Magazine’s* Career Expo For People With Disabilities will be in Los Angeles on February 2nd.

Thomas: The Conference Board will be hosting several conferences in New York City:

The Growth and Innovation Conference will be held on February 1st and 2nd.

The 2006 Executive Coaching Conference will be on February 2nd and 3rd.

The Enterprise Learning Strategies Conference will be on February 7th and 8th.

The 2006 Employee Health Care Conference will be on February 9th and 10th.

And the Human Capital Metrics Conference will be on February 14th and 15th.

Yvonne: A DeafNation Expo is scheduled for February 11 in Phoenix, Arizona.

And the 2006 Black Engineer of the Year Awards Conference will be in Baltimore, Maryland February 16th through the 18th.

Finally, February 20th is Presidents' Day.

Thomas: You can find more information on those events, and on other observances and conferences, on the Diversity Management Web site at the address shown below. Just click on the link to the calendar.

Yvonne: That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. Be sure to check back with us next month when we'll be talking about TEAM building!

Both: GO TEAM!

Thomas: Until then, for more frequent doses of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!