Language, Sex, and Power: Women and Men in the Workplace

Okay, confession time:

To what extent do you believe, along with author John Gray, that men are from Mars and women are from Venus? Forget about how gender differences play out in the bedroom. Let's talk about how they affect what happens in conference rooms, boardrooms, and executive offices.

Legislators on Capitol Hill may debate whether women in the military should be in combat, but women on the front lines of the military and businesses might say that they already are—considering that charges of sexual harassment make the headlines on a regular basis, from Mitsubishi to the U.S. Army.

Then there is the glass ceiling, which, as countless women will attest, remains firmly in place in workplaces across America. In October 1996, the research firm Catalyst reported that only 10 percent of top jobs at the 500 largest U.S. companies were held by women. And there was only one woman CEO among the ranks of the *Fortune* 500, Jill Bartad of Mattel.

Do those inequities account for the friction between men and women in the workplace, for the daily communication "disconnects," and for the incidents of harassment? What can men and women do to build bridges of better communication and understanding at work?

Those are just a few topics I wanted to cover with author, socio-linguist, and Georgetown University professor Deborah Tannen when I met with her recently in her Washington, D.C. office.

Tannen, a respected and perhaps the best-known expert on workplace communication, is credited with being the first person to bring to the forefront the differences in communication styles between men and women. Her international best-seller, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and*

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Men in Conversation (William Morrow, 1990), raised awareness about the differences and the fact that they are established in early childhood through talk and play.

For example, Tannen says that men tend to view conversations as "negotiations" in which they try to achieve status and maintain independence. For men, interactions are, on one level, a contest of power and will. Their goal is to avoid being the "weakest" boy on the playground.

Women, on the other hand, tend to view conversation as a way to connect with other people. For them, conversation is about finding commonality and building networks of connection and intimacy.

In *Talking From 9-5, Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex, and Power* (Avon Books, 1994), Tannen broke new ground by discussing the ways that gender differences can hinder (or enrich) communication between men and women at work. Tannen says that even when gender differences don't erupt in harassment or violence, they can affect who is valued in the workplace, who is recognized, who is promoted, and what gets done.

For example, many women have done well on a big project and then seen a man get the credit. Or they avert a major crisis and no one notices. Or they come up with a breakthrough idea for a new product and are ignored until a man suggests the same idea.

What's going on?

He asked, she said

HERE'S AN INTERVIEW WITH SOCIO-LINGUIST DEBORAH TANNEN, AUTHOR OF THE GROUNDBREAKING *YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND: WOMEN AND MEN IN CONVERSATION.*

Koonce: When you began researching your books and focusing on gender as part of your work, did you have any idea that there would be such a groundswell of interest?

Tannen: I think when it comes to gender, everyone knows it's an issue between men and women. Everyone knows there are certain discomfort levels and that you can feel frustrated, misunderstood, or puzzled by what a person of the other sex says to you.

Koonce: Your writing has caused a lot of women to have "uh-huh" experiences.

Tannen: That's true. It was the most common response after people read *You Just Don't Understand.* They said things like, "You've been hiding

in my kitchen. I see myself on every page." It was gratifying. I wrote *9-5* because people told me that though the first book was helpful, I should write about the workplace because they spend half of their lives at work.

Koonce: How much do you think current communication problems in the workplace are related to gender?

Tannen: Gender cross-cuts everything else. You could say that all workplace problems are about power differentials. You tell one of your staff what to do and he or she doesn't do it. Or you think your boss makes unreasonable demands. All of those things are filtered through gender.

The way you expect a male boss to talk is different from how you expect a female boss to talk. You might not realize that if your boss were the other sex and talking to you in the same way, you would have a different reaction.

Koonce: You also say that no one conversational style is best and that men and women can learn important things from each other's styles.

Tannen: To say that one conversational style is better than another is like saying that Spanish is better than French.

In most organizations, a style, usually a predominantly male one, was established as the norm before women arrived in great numbers and positions of authority. Women weren't there when the rules were set so, in that sense, women's and men's styles aren't considered equally valid.

Koonce: Given that male imprint on many corporate cultures, should women adopt male styles of communication if they want to get ahead?

Tannen: There is no one right way to communicate. Women bring many styles to the workplace that are effective, sometimes more effective than the norm. They tend to make people feel included, ask for their input, and give praise—things that all people seem to like. You don't find men complaining that their bosses praise them too much.

There are women who adopt typically male styles, and that works great. They're happy that way. Other women find that if they adopt male styles, they get negative responses. So, they don't feel comfortable doing that. And there are women who say, "I stick with my style and do a good job. The people I work with learn that's me."

What matters is the specific situation—what a woman feels comfortable doing and how people around her react.

Koonce: How do you counsel men who want to be more effective at managing women?

Tannen: If you're managing people, it's important to remember that not everyone has the same style. What's right for one person may not be right for other people.

I recall someone whom I interviewed and observed, who thought he had the right style at work. Once a day, every day, he checked in with everyone who worked for him. Some people, generally men, thought that

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was too much. They felt that he was looking over their shoulders and didn't trust them to do a good job. They asked, "Why are you always coming in here to check on me?"

For other staff members, generally women, it wasn't enough. They said, "You're not interested. You don't spend any time. Why should I be interested if you're not?"

And for some people, his style was just right.

So, developing awareness that people have different styles is important. Try to raise your own sensitivity to the kind of responses you get so that you can gauge: This seems to be working well with this person, I'm okay. Or, this person isn't reacting well; what can I do differently? In some cases, you need to *meta-communicate*—in other words, talk to people about what you're doing.

Koonce: Are there differences in managing men and women that managers should be aware of?

Tannen: There are things women have to watch out for in managing men and things men have to watch out for in managing women. When I was doing the research for *9-5*, I found that women expect more feedback from male bosses than they sometimes get. So, it's important for male bosses to tell women staff members when they're doing a good job and praise them if things are going well. In comparison, a lot of men told me that the best thing to do is hire good people and then get out of their way. But not every man or woman is going to [fit those profiles].

Koonce: So, don't take a cookie-cutter approach to managing people based on gender?

Tannen: Right. Treating all women the same is just as bad as treating women like men. You need to see individual differences in people. Women who manage men, however, probably do want to be aware that many men are sensitive to being told what to do by women. Women managers have to find a way to deal with that. Some women [find a way] to tell people what to do without actually giving orders.

Koonce: They tell people what to do in indirect ways?

Tannen: Indirect or buffered. Such as, "You know what I would do?" Or "I wouldn't do it that way." Men can also be indirect. I haven't heard a lot of orders barked directly by men. That's a stereotype. I have found that men are indirect in an understated way. They say such things as, "Let's get a status report on where things are." That's indirect because they say "let's" and mean, "Do it." But it's different from what I heard from women.

Koonce: Do women run the risk of being too indirect?

Tannen: The video version of *9-5* shows examples of women's buffered styles. It shows women giving orders to women, and there is no confusion. The women all say, "OK." But there can be confusion when women give orders to men in [a buffered] way. A man might not understand what he's being asked to do. He might construe a woman's indirect way of managing him as giving him options when, in fact, she isn't.

Koonce: Let's shift gears. Given the move to team-based work, is there a

place for hierarchy and command-and-control ways of managing people?

Tannen: That's an interesting question. American workplaces tend to be hierarchical, but we also have an ethic that hierarchy is bad. Making the team approach work can be tricky. An organization might say that it is going to work in teams, but rewards, promotions, and raises are still handed out to individuals. So, work is done by teams, but teams aren't promoted.

Koonce: Do you think women are at a disadvantage when working in teams?

Tannen: In the workplaces where I've been, I've observed that a woman on a team might come up with an idea, but she isn't the one who talks about it to the boss. So, she doesn't get credit. Though women may be comfortable with teamwork, it can backfire on them. It can cause a woman's true worth to be overlooked. I saw that happening a lot while researching *9-5*.

Koonce: Then, you'd argue that the value of a lot of highly competent women in the workplace is overlooked because they don't play by men's rules?

Tannen: That's right. This is an extreme example perhaps, but Kathryn Graham talks in her autobiography, *Personal History*, about how unprepared she was for the job of running the *Washington Post*. She ended up fabulously capable, but if her husband hadn't died, she probably never would have become publisher.

I think women all over the workplace who, given promotions, would do a great job, but they don't get promoted because they don't usually exhibit the behavior that's needed for higher-level positions. In American business, there's an assumption that people should exhibit the behavior associated with a job before getting the job. But women tend to feel that it's presumptuous to act as if they have power they don't yet have.

Koonce: Are you saying that women who want to succeed have to start acting like men do—promote themselves and display power?

Tannen: Women either have to change their behavior or the people who decide the promotions have to change their criteria. I would rather see the latter happen. I'd like to see the people who evaluate and make promotion decisions develop an appreciation for different styles. I'd like to see them look further to find out exactly who on the team came up with that great idea.

Koonce: To see whether it's one of the quiet women members?

Tannen: Right.

Koonce: Back to hierarchy. Do you think there is still a place for hierarchy in the American workplace?

Tannen: Yes. Women and men can learn from each others' styles. Men can learn to be more inclusive, to ask for people's input without feeling that compromises their status, to apologize when they do something wrong, and to admit when they make a mistake without feeling that lessens their power. Women can benefit from men's tendency to accept hierarchy. Sometimes, you have to tell people what to do.

Koonce: Are there dangers for men in hierarchical situations when they don't solicit people's input?

Tannen: It's much easier for information to travel down a hierarchy than up. Often, [lower-level employees] have a perspective that higher-ranking people don't have. So, bosses of either sex need to ask people below them for input because those people might see something they don't.

Look what happened when the space shuttle Challenger blew up. Staff people knew that it couldn't take off in cold weather because the O rings weren't operable below a certain temperature. But that information didn't get up the chain of command.

So, men can learn lessons from women about being inclusive and asking people for their opinions. And women can benefit from men because there is such a thing as getting too much input and deliberating too long.

The ideal style is a flexible one in which you use the strategy that's appropriate to the situation. But few of us do that.

Koonce: Is having a flexible style the same thing as having an androgynous style?

Tannen: Conversational styles aren't totally gender-based. They also have to do with culture and ethnicity. For example, American women are more likely to take dynamic opposition personally. I bring up an idea, you argue against it, and I'm insulted and hurt—and I think you have something against me.

Women can learn from men to engage in dynamic opposition and not take it personally. But that varies by culture. In Asian cultures, both men and women resist expressing disagreement and opposition. But confrontation and opposition are common in Mediterranean, Israeli, African American, South American, French, and German cultures. A lot of Americans who do business with German companies are horrified by the way German women yell and argue.

Koonce: So, culture as well as gender affects the way men and women communicate?

Tannen: They dovetail. Gender, ethnicity, and class are intertwined.

Koonce: You said that gender cross-cuts everything else.

Tannen: I wouldn't say any one [factor] is more important, but gender is the most salient.

When you walk down a street and someone is walking towards you, the first decision you make is whether the person is male or female—not whether he or she is French or German. When you are talking with someone you think is an American and you find that he or she is German, you do a double-take. But if you're talking to someone you think is a woman and find is a man, that's a bigger double-take. Culture filters through gender.

Koonce: What's your conversational style?

Tannen: I should ask you; you have been listening to me [laughing]. You know, academics are privileged. One thing that blew my mind when I did this research was finding out what it's like to work in corporations, where what you do depends so much on other people. Academic people work pretty much independently. I deal with students, but that's not like dealing with a boss or staff.

I tend to give orders in an indirect, toned-down, buffered way. I never say to my assistant, "Type this." I say, "Maybe it would be a good idea to...." And she does it. I have never had a problem with someone understand-

ing what I wanted [done]. But my assistants have always been women.

Koonce: Because people are interdependent in most workplaces, is that all the more reason a flexible style is important?

Tannen: In an office where there is a boss, staff people, and co-workers and everything has to be done through interaction, the possibility and prevalence of misunderstanding are mind-boggling. Amazingly, though, people seem to do well.

Koonce: In *9-5*, you made an intriguing comment that all things being equal, women tend to adjust more to men's styles than vice versa.

Tannen: Research has shown that when women and men come together, women tend to change more. Women accommodate more to the presence of men than men do to the presence of women. That's not to say that men don't accommodate at all. For instance, men talk differently when women are around—less cursing and fewer off-color jokes. Pilots, for example, say that they really talk foul when no women are in the cockpit. But when a woman is there, they tone it down.

Koonce: Talk about a cowboy environment! Do you think women are better listeners?

Tannen: Women are more inclined to pay attention to *ways* of talking than men are. That's because [growing up], girls talk about talk. Talk is the currency of women's relationships and friendships. Talk creates intimacy. Women listen and pay attention to subtleties and people's ways of speaking.

Men's friendships are built on activities, doing things together. Men are sensitive to nuances about status and position. I think many men are more attuned to those subtleties. That's why when people say women are more sensitive, I don't think that's really true. I think women [and men] tend to be sensitive to nuances.

Koonce: We hear so much about sexual harassment. How should a woman deal with it?

Tannen: It's hard to finesse, but she has to. She has to communicate that she doesn't want it to go on, in a way that he doesn't feel unjustly accused.

Koonce: It has to be frightening for a woman to confront a man about feeling harassed.

Tannen: It's difficult, partly because the woman is introducing a confrontational tone into the interaction and women are more likely than men to consider such a tone to be unacceptable. Women want communications with co-workers to be harmonious. The prospect of working with someone with whom they don't feel harmonious is more unappealing to women than it is to men. For that reason, most women have learned to resist introducing disharmonious tones into interactions.

Koonce: So, for a woman to bring up sexual harassment puts her in a tough place. Though her rights might be at issue, she's also being forced to be confrontational.

Women and men can learn from each others' styles. Men can be more inclusive

Tannen: Yes. If a woman feels that she has to say something, she may feel uncomfortable for the reasons I've described. At the same time, raising an issue that in any way speaks to sex or sexuality is likely to be perceived by her as potentially compromising. A man isn't necessarily going to view references to sex or sexuality as shameful. But for a woman to bring up something with sexual overtones puts sexuality "on the record." That's hard for women to do.

Koonce: Are there ways women can deal with this issue at work?

Tannen: My first choice would be a joking way. Let's say that a man at work puts his arm around a woman and she doesn't like it. It's likely that what one woman finds offensive, another won't. In some cultures, everyone is constantly touching. But if a woman feels that someone is touching her in an inappropriate way, she could try to address it in a joking manner.

Koonce: What I'm hearing is that you don't suggest escalating a confrontation until or unless it's necessary.

Tannen: I certainly don't think anyone should tolerate behavior he or she doesn't like. I'm talking about strategy. I would say that the least confrontational strategy that works is best. But if a woman has to be confrontational, she has to be.

Koonce: What do you make of the recent developments at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, the Citadel, and the Pentagon?

Tannen: I find it easy to believe the worst. Those are situations that have been all-male for so long that the presence of women is offensive to some men. I don't doubt that the men are trying to scare off the women and get them out of there. And it is working.

Koonce: What's your advice to women who want to go the Citadel or have a military career?

Tannen: Well, if a woman wants to go to the Citadel, I'd love to know why. I'd love to know why a man wants to go there [laughing]. But many women thrive in the military. It's a *meritocracy*—an environment in which working-class people can do a good job and rise. What you're supposed to do is clear-cut.

Koonce: Do you think that for a woman to be successful in a military environment it requires her to pay an emotional, psychological, or personal price?

Tannen: It depends on the individual. There must be some women for whom it's congenial. I imagine the same is true for men. Carol Barkalow, author of *The Men's House* and one of the first women to graduate from West Point, told me that she started out in the Army trying to act like the guys. Then, she decided that she had to find a style that was more natural to her but assertive enough to be taken seriously in the military.

That may be the compromise for women in that environment. Few can handle it or be successful by trying to act like men; they're not comfortable doing that or others aren't comfortable.

Koonce: Are there success traits common to all women who rise to the top in organizations?

Tannen: Women have significantly different styles. I have found women high up who seem to have succeeded by acting like men—at least, that's how

people see them. There are women who rise by being super-feminine. And there are women who rise with styles that are business-like and no-nonsense, but with feminine markers.

Koonce: Do assertive women run the risk of being labeled with the B word?

Tannen: Yes. Not all men adopt a style associated with power, but when they do, it enhances their authority and masculinity. But when women talk the way expected of a person with authority, they're seen as unfeminine. When they talk the way expected of a woman, they're seen as incompetent and unconfident. So, they have a special challenge.

Koonce: What do you think will be the effect on the diplomatic world of the appointment of Madeleine Albright as U.S. Secretary of State? On a recent *60 Minutes,* she said that a lesson she learned as a woman professional is the importance of speaking up. She recounted being in a roomful of men and having a good idea, but not speaking up. Then, a man suggested the same idea.

Tannen: Many women in power realize in retrospect that they often second-guessed themselves. When they come into positions of prominence, they learn to express ideas as they come up and trust their judgment rather than censoring themselves. Learning to trust one's own judgment is important for women leaders.

Koonce: Is there anything you'd like to talk about that I haven't asked?

Tannen: The use of apologies in conversation. Women frequently say, "I'm sorry" when they don't mean it as an apology. It just means, "I'm sorry that happened." It's a paradigm example of how a woman-type style takes someone else's feelings into account and gets interpreted the wrong way—as in, "You lack confidence; you think everything is your fault." A lot of men I talk with say that understanding why women say they're sorry helps them understand women better. Previously, they were annoyed by women who were always saying, "I'm sorry."

Koonce: So, women shouldn't say that?

Tannen: I'd rather men start saying it *more.* But women should be aware of their styles. If they're having problems or feel their true worth isn't appreciated, they might ask themselves what changes they could make. Or they might want to explain to people that they're not apologizing, just saying that they're sorry something happened.

And, people sometimes assume that women in power have problems only with men. But that's not the case. Women in high positions often have more problems with women.

Koonce: Why?

Tannen: Because in the ethics of women's groups (going back to how girls are socialized), a negative value is placed on one girl acting as if she's better than everyone else. Boys' groups tend to be hierarchical. It's accepted that one boy is going to be the leader and the others will have to kowtow. In girls' groups, everyone is supposed to appear to be the same, at least on the surface. Not everyone is: Some girls have high status and others have low status. But the high-status girls aren't supposed to flaunt it.

> ■ ***Even if conversational styles were biologically based, we could say, we're going to change*** ■

So, when a woman comes into a workplace and begins behaving like previous male bosses, many women complain. When a male boss does the same thing, it isn't an issue.

Koonce: Here's my last question: Are people's conversational styles a matter of biology or environment? Nature or nurture?

Tannen: The short answer is that it's probably impossible to pick apart what's biological and what's cultural. What interests me is why people ask that question. I thought my work as a socio-linguist would be to describe how the world *is.* It was beyond my interest and expertise how it got that way. Usually, people who ask the question think it's one or the other. Usually, women want me to say it's cultural and men want me to say it's biological.

I suspect that many women are cautious about admitting a biological element because they think it will be used against them. Men may think, "If it's biological, then I don't have to feel guilty. It's not anything I did; it's just the way the world is."

I don't think any of that is true. There's nothing more human than to go against biology. And there's nothing harder than to go against culture. Culture is ingrained and, in a sense, biologically determined. In other words, part of our biological inheritance is that we have culture. Even animals have culture. We have ritualized ways of doing things that are established over time and work for us.

As a socio-linguist, I'm inclined to emphasize the cultural side because things are different in different cultures. But I'm sure there is also a biological element. In almost all cultures, for instance, men engage in ritual opposition—fighting for fun.

Koonce: So, it doesn't matter whether communication styles are biologically or culturally based. Both men and women can modify their styles if they want to, and they can be conscious of other people's styles. We're not limited by biology or culture in behaving differently towards each other.

Tannen: That's it. Even if conversational styles were biologically based, we could say, "We are like that, but we're going to change." And we *can* change. We have to understand how the world is. Then, we can ask how we want the world to be. And then we can ask, "What do we have to do to change it?" How it got that way doesn't figure into the equation. ■

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To order a copy of Tannen's video, 9-5, *call Charthouse International Learning Corporation at 800.328.3785.*