

Gender Differences in Coaching & Being Coached

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We should have known we were in for an entertaining, as well as educational, presentation when Steve and Jonamay began their part of the program with a role-play that included many common gender stereotypes. The purpose of the workshop was to identify and understand the effect of gender differences in the world of work and in career counseling. They drew on the findings of Deborah Tannen, John Gray and Pat Heim in developing the presentation.

The understanding and constructive use of gender differences in working with clients can result in:

- * A better understanding of and empathy for the career challenges our clients face;
- * A greater potential for conversational rapport with our clients; and
- * Fewer tendencies for us to give recommendations based on our own gender style to our clients.

Steve and Jonamay gave examples of three types of gender differences:

- * Those that occur more frequently for one gender than the other. For example, men tend to find mentors more naturally than women, while women more often build a network of close friends inside and outside of work.
- * Those that have a different impact on one gender than the other. For example, women find they face a more adverse reaction than men to openly expressing anger in the workplace, while men find they face more of a stigma to taking advantage of family friendly company benefits, such as parental leave.
- * Those that are more difficult to overcome for one gender than the other. For example, men have more of a fear of openly expressing feelings in the workplace, while women often hesitate to strongly promote themselves.

In the first of several exercises designed to involve (and open the eyes of) the group, the participants broke up into gender-diverse groups and identified common career challenges faced by each gender.

Challenges identified for men were less of a tendency toward emoting; being more task oriented; viewing themselves as the breadwinner (and thus less perceived ability to change careers); being judged by their profession; and feeling hesitant to ask for assistance.

Women's challenges were wondering if they were being taken seriously; having limited access to the inner circle of decision makers; being perceived in a traditional role by both men and other women; and feeling they have to leave their femininity at the door when they go to work.

The next exercise utilized gender-specific groups discussing gender socialization. One group of men and many groups of women (a common break-down for our profession?) discussed items such as: their decade of "growing-up" and their parent's roles; gender messages they received; what common childhood games and gatherings they participated in; and how they resolved conflict with others of their own gender. The debriefing seemed to focus attention on the task and competition focus of men and the desire of women to have harmonious relationships.

Communication style differences were the next item we faced. We saw a short video of a presentation by Pat Heim and discussed how men tend to communicate in a hierarchical way (direct, focused on results) and women more often communicated in a connective way (looking for closeness and connection).

The focus of the session then switched from gaining an understanding of gender differences, to how to use that understanding to help ourselves coach those of different genders. In working with those of different genders, we must keep in mind that men and women often approach many of the topics we touch upon in coaching in significantly different ways. Specific gender differences in communication style include:

- * The purpose of communication for men is to report, while for women it is rapport.
- * The focus of planning for men is goal setting, while for women it is processing.

- * The way men give direction is directive, while women tend to be more facilitative.
- * When asking questions or seeking help, men tend to be hesitant and women find it natural.
- * Conversely, men find self-promotion natural and women much prefer a process oriented and collaborative role.
- * When it comes to problem-solving, men are more solution oriented, while women look for understanding and empathy.
- * Men's view of teamwork comes from sports, where the purpose is to win. Women, on the other hand, seek equal involvement and focus on the process more than the results.

We were also given three suggestions (developed by Pat Heim) for bridging communication-related gender gaps in coaching. In fact, these suggestions would work very well for any type of communication gap that you might face as a coach.

First, reinterpret the intent of the client. Suspend immediate judgment and mentally reframe the situation by taking a look at what you perceive the intent of the other to be. Tell yourself, "(s)he's not intending to make a hostile statement; perhaps it's just a different way of looking at the situation.

Second, flex your communication style to incorporate some of the preferences of the other gender (see the list above). For me this will mean finding replacements for my vast array of sports metaphors.

Third, talk it over, if there is a foundation of basic trust between the two people involved. This can bring gender related differences out in the open and make them easier to work with.

Jonamay and Steve had us break into groups of two to discuss how we would want to be coached by someone from the opposite gender and what we learned from this session that we will use to help us in coaching across genders.