

Alex Efthymiades: Do women and men communicate differently during mediation?

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In John Gray's best-selling book from the early 1990s, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, he describes how women and men seem to be from different planets because they are so different from each other. Whilst there are always exceptions and individual differences, a lot of recent and reliable research by psychologists, linguists and other social scientists suggests that there are some distinct differences in the ways in which women and men communicate.

This article looks at some of the different ways in which both genders communicate, explores whether these differences are apparent in a workplace mediation setting, and then examines what type of communication helps or hinders the success of mediation. The article concludes by suggesting ways in which we can support women and men to communicate more effectively during conflict situations.

How our expectations inform our perceptions

There are many reasons why women and men communicate differently. Research suggests that whilst most women use both sides of their brains to communicate, men only use the left side of the brain for communication. In addition, because women and men are socialised differently, we place certain expectations on them regarding how they should behave and communicate. We have views about femininity and masculinity and our social norms impose huge pressures on how we expect people to communicate and behave with each other.

Most cultures expect women to be nurturing and cooperative and men to be assertive and competitive. This is played out in our different communication styles, both verbal and non-verbal. In general, men communicate in more direct ways and with less eye contact, whilst women seek connection with others and focus on relationships. This can at times lead to miscommunication, misinterpreted messages, and even conflict. For example, when the more direct manner in which a man communicates is perceived by a woman to be insensitive or aggressive. Or when the more 'coded' manner in which a woman communicates to a man is perceived as unfocused or unassertive. Because of these differences, there are often gaps between what is expressed by the speaker and what is heard by the listener.

How we communicate when we are in conflict

When in conflict, research suggests that women tend to want to examine the detail of a conflict, whilst men want to fix the problem rather than talking about why it happened in great detail.

Workplace mediators are particularly interested in workplace communication and how differences in how people communicate may result in workplace conflict. For example, we know that face-to-face communication is the most effective way of having a conversation and yet more and more workplaces are relying on other forms of communication that exacerbate miscommunication and thus conflict.

The over-reliance of email usage is one obvious way in which miscommunication happens and this is often a huge source of conflict, regardless of gender.

Different communication styles in workplace mediation

But the question is, if women and men generally tend to communicate differently, do they also communicate differently when they are in mediation? And if that is the case, does this influence the success of mediation?

There is no reliable research into this area, however, based on the hundreds of mediation cases that we have done, there are some interesting conclusions that we can tentatively draw and learn from.

In a workplace mediation, the mediator creates a safe environment to support all parties, regardless of gender, to speak about their conflict, their perceptions of what has happened, their feelings and the impact that the conflict is having on them. We have observed that this often comes more naturally to women, who are more likely to speak about relationships and emotions. But men, when they are comfortable and with a skilled mediator, will also open up and speak about their emotions, though this tends to take longer.

Being able to speak about emotions is helpful in a workplace mediation. Because parties who are in conflict with each other tend to demonise each other, being able to have empathy for the person that you are in conflict with can be a really useful first step in being able to see the other party as a human being with feelings and needs that are likely similar to ours.

So what happens when there are two women in mediation? They may speak more openly about their feelings, but this does not mean that the conflict is less complex or more easy for the parties to resolve. At times, the focus on why the conflict has happened and how it has destroyed the relationship, may make a resolution more difficult to attain.

In contrast, when there are two men in mediation, this does not mean that they simply ignore feelings and go straight into problem-solving mode. We have found that when men are sensitively asked about their feelings and they allow themselves to open up emotionally, they are also able to find the empathic connection that will allow them to heal some of the hurt that has fueled their conflict.

What we can learn

There are some important lessons that we can learn from successful mediations and that is that effective communication is key to mediation, regardless of the gender of the parties. Here are some key learning points to support us in any conflict resolution conversation, including an actual workplace mediation:

- It is important to understand that differences in communication exist and that women and men do communicate differently. By understanding this, we are less likely to misinterpret what others are saying and thus less likely to get into conflict.
- In and out of work, focus on face-to-face communication and don't rely on technology as a form of communication. It is much easier to misinterpret someone's message via email or text than it is if you are engaging in a dialogue with someone.
- Speaking about the impact of a conflict is key to creating empathy between parties in conflict. Parties who are able to have empathy for one another, regardless of gender, are more likely to be able to resolve their conflict amicably.
- It is important to realise that there is no best way to communicate. Often, we think that our way of communicating is superior to that of others. For example, a woman may believe that because she is able to focus on relationships, this is more important than her male colleague's tendency to focus on the practical. However, by realising that there are differences in how we communicate and that these differences can be understood and talked about, will help us to have healthier and more productive conversations.