



Understanding the Differences Between How Women and Men Communicate

Introduction

On both sides of the gender divide, tales of miscommunication abound, some amusing, some tragic. In a coaching environment, typically highly charged, the likelihood of misunderstandings is great. Effective communication becomes essential to success.

As the wise coach sharpens her overall communication skills, she inevitably runs into situations rooted in the very real differences between how women and men communicate. How to deal effectively with these differences has received comparatively little attention. As sport psychologist Penny Werthner writes in this issue of the Journal, the coach who grasps differing conversational styles and incorporates her learnings into her speaking and listening is well on her way to becoming more effective and ultimately, more successful in dealing with her athletes and colleagues.

Penny draws on the writings of Deborah Tannen, whose 1990 book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* blew the lid off the subject, and applies the linguistics professor's revelations to coaching.

On the subject of confidence, for example, Tannen writes that because women tend to verbally downplay their expertise, what may look like lack of confidence on the part of women is a reluctance to appear boastful. (Sound familiar?) Penny explains how well-developed listening skills ensure that you, the coach, are able to distinguish between the words you hear and what others are really saying. She covers integrating the highly skilled athlete into the team, discusses the 'how' and 'when' of asking questions, and explains "the rituals of apologies, feedback, and opposition".. Buttressing each point are the comments of leading women coaches Ingrid Paul, Elaine Dagg-Jackson, and Moira D'Andrea and the insights of Olympians Susan Auch and Margaret Langford, and world record holder Neal Marshall, who is eloquent on the strengths of his coach, Ingrid Paul. — Sheila Robertson

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW WOMEN AND MEN COMMUNICATE

By Penny Werthner

In the third issue of the Journal (January 2001), I wrote about the skills involved in communicating with clarity, and how such skills help you in numerous situations – in your day-to-day relationships with and coaching of your athletes and in your work relationships with staff, assistant coaches, and your national sport federation (NSF). Among the skills are understanding non-verbal communication; listening well; speaking clearly and concisely; giving and receiving feedback and criticism; choosing the right words; and resolving conflict effectively.

Continuing the theme of communication in this article, I examine some of the current research and thinking on the differing ways women and men communicate and look at how knowledge and an understanding of potential differences can help you significantly in becoming a more effective coach. I place the research within the context of what women coaches and athletes have to say about working with each other. The focus is on speaking (what gets said and how it is said) and on listening (what gets heard and why).

An important note. Although I am writing about the differences between how women and men communicate, it is not my purpose to conclude that “this is how men are and this is how women are” in their communication styles, or to suggest that life and relationships would be a whole lot simpler if it was that cut and dried. My purpose is to help you be a more effective coach. Developing a better understanding of differing conversational styles and critically reflecting on how you, as a woman and as a coach, speak and listen will help you be more effective coaching both female and male athletes and interacting with female and male colleagues. I hope that just as male coaches work with both female and male athletes, women coaches will not focus exclusively on female athletes. There are many examples of very good women coaches who have successfully coached male athletes, and you will hear from some of them. As you read this article, keep in mind your own experiences and note how some of these ideas might “fit” for you in your coaching world.

In her book *You Just Don't Understand, Women and Men in Conversation*, and in an article in *Harvard Business Review* entitled “The Power Of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why,” Deborah Tannen writes about the influence of linguistic styles on conversations and relationships, particularly in terms of the differences in women’s and men’s communication. What exactly does Tannen mean by linguistic style? Everything each of us says, whether we are female or male, is said in a certain way, in a certain tone of voice, at a certain speed, with a certain choice of words, with directness or indirectness, with a certain degree of quietness or loudness. Each of us has a certain speaking pattern, and Tannen argues that there are fundamental differences between women and men in how those patterns look and sound. “In other words, linguistic style is a set of culturally learned signals by which we not only communicate what we mean but also interpret others’ meaning and evaluate one another as people.”

Tannen says that language communicates ideas and, at the same time, negotiates relationships. So how is that relevant for you as a coach?

When you speak with your athletes and colleagues, you are conveying information and knowledge. Simultaneously, a more subtle form of communication is going on. As you communicate, you are, in fact, building relationships between you and your athletes and colleagues. What factors affect this building of effective and productive relationships or, in some circumstances, non-effective, non-productive relationships?

Research has shown that the patterns that make up how men and women speak are not the same. According to Tannen, we learn ways of speaking as children, especially from peers, and children tend to play with other children of the same gender. She states that research on North American children has shown that girls tend to play in small groups or with a single friend, spend a lot of time talking, and tend to downplay ways one girl is better than another. Boys tend to play in larger groups. Some are expected to become the leaders and emphasize how they are better. Boys learn to use words to negotiate their status by displaying their abilities and knowledge. In essence, Tannen argues that boys, growing into young men, use talk to emphasize status and girls, growing into young women, use talk to create connections. (As Tannen notes, and I emphasize, not all boys and girls grow up in this way, but it tends to be the way we learn our conversational styles.)

Women are also inclined to downplay rather than display their expertise. A study by Helena Leet-Pellegrini that looked at gender and expertise, set up pairs of women, pairs of men, and mixed pairs, with one in each pair set up as the "expert." She found that, on average, the individual with expertise talked more, but men experts talked more than women experts. She also found that the women did not use their expertise as power, but rather tried to downplay it. The men in this study, whether declared as experts or not, were much more inclined to attempt to dominate the situation, challenge the other individual, and fight for control and status.

Keeping in mind these notions of status versus creating connections, and expertise and gender, what implications might they have for you?

Scenario I: Imagine you set up a meeting with your athletes, both female and male, in your club. You are looking for input into next year's training program and suggestions about what is going well and what isn't. If you are aware of the potential differences between how your female and male athletes might speak up in such a setting, you understand the necessity of listening well to each athlete, to what is said, and particularly to who is speaking and who is not. You seek the opinions and thoughts of athletes who did not say much during the meeting. You might plan to meet individually with each of those athletes.

Scenario II: Imagine you are the sole female coach in a group of provincial coaches invited to a meeting to discuss issues that have arisen within your sport over the last six months. Being 3M NCCP Level 3 certified, you are more qualified than any of the others and have suggestions on how to resolve some of the issues. How do you ensure your voice is heard? First, recognize that you have expertise in this area. Second, prepare well in terms of thinking about what you want to say and how you could go about making the suggestions (preparing a clear message, thinking about tone of voice, listening well to queries). Third, recognize that the men may challenge you and prepare answers to potential questions.

A Success Story

Neal Marshall, three-time Olympian in long track speed skating (Albertville, 1992, Lillehammer, 1994, Nagano, 1998), with world records in 1500m and 3000m, was coached by Ingrid Paul for four years, from 1994 to 1998. Ingrid had been on the Dutch national speed skating team and competed in the 1988 Calgary Olympics.

"Ingrid was a great coach. It was not a factor at all that she was a woman. She was good at her job. She was organized, good at communicating, and an expert at training from a physiological perspective. She wasn't intimidated by us. All athletes are critical and we were a bunch of young, aggressive, 'go-get-em' guys who questioned everything," said Neal. He explained that Ingrid was good at listening. She also took the time to explain clearly how she designed his training program and she was prepared with knowledge to defend that program.

As Neal achieved world-class performances, their relationship developed to the point that, as he says, "if I felt I was doing too much, she listened and took it into consideration." Ingrid had a high level of confidence in her expertise and yet, at the same time, understood that it was OK and, in fact, normal that her athletes would challenge her.

You need first to develop your coaching expertise through courses, practising critical reflection and self-assessment, reading this Journal and, most importantly, by coaching over a number of years. Second, when you have developed a significant degree of knowledge and expertise, you need to recognize that some athletes and colleagues will still challenge your expertise, so you must prepare to speak up for yourself – not in an aggressive way, but in an assertive manner. (See "Communicating with Clarity" [Journal, January 2001] for the difference between being aggressive and being assertive).

Along similar lines, it is relevant to look at the differing uses of "I" and "we". In her research in the workplace, Tannen noted that men said "I" in situations where women said "we." From a sport perspective, this raises a number of different aspects for discussion. First, as you probably well know, sometimes it is entirely appropriate, for both genders, to give an "I" message. In "Communicating with Clarity," one of the skills I discussed was giving a clear and concise message using "I." This kind of message requires you to state the issue and take ownership for what you feel and what you need. In situations where such a conversation is required (athletes coming late for practice or not putting equipment away, for example) you, as the coach, take the lead and ask for what is needed. In other situations, such as building your group of athletes into a team, using "we" is much more appropriate and necessary. Within such a context, both male and female coaches and female and male athletes need to put their egos and personal needs aside, use "we," and work towards helping each other, which will, in turn, ensure growing into a fully functioning team.

Being Highly Skilled and Being Part of a Team

Tannen also found that "...women are less likely than men to have learned to blow their own horn. And they are more likely than men to believe that if they do, they won't be liked." Often young women athletes are as concerned with being liked by their teammates as they are with being skilled. As a coach working with these young women athletes, you want to help them understand that they can be competitive, excel at their sport, and still be liked and appreciated by the team.

On the other hand, in my work with a number of Olympic level women athletes, both in individual sports and team sports, I have seen incredibly intense, highly skilled athletes who sometimes appeared to not care at all about teammates or what others thought of them. Needless to say, there was conflict.

In this kind of situation, what you do not want to do is single out the intense, driven athlete as the “perfect” athlete. Don’t say, “Look what Janice did today. Why can’t the rest of you work as hard as she does?” This only serves to isolate the athlete even further from her teammates and escalate the conflict. What you do want to do is meet individually with that athlete and encourage her with specific suggestions on how she can help her teammates train harder and be tougher. She can do that by example as much as by words. At the same time, through dialogue and meetings, you can listen to athletes’ concerns and help them understand that the level of intensity and competitiveness of their teammate will actually help the performance of the team.

Confidence

Tannen cites studies that show, in terms of verbal behaviour, that women are more likely to downplay their certainty and men are more likely to minimize their doubts. She suggests that what may look like lack of confidence on the part of many women may be a reluctance to appear boastful.

What does this mean for you, particularly if you coach both female and male athletes? Primarily it means that you need to hone your listening skills. Is the male athlete who appears confident really feeling ready and well prepared? Is the female athlete who is reluctant to state out loud that she is confident and ready really lacking in confidence? Here is where you need to be very careful about making assumptions. You need to step back, ask questions of each of your athletes to find out what they are thinking and feeling, and really listen as they speak. What they say and what they mean may differ.

Regardless of gender, and within the context of high performance Olympic sport, confidence can be a fragile commodity. In conducting in-depth interviews with many of Canada’s Olympic athletes over the last five years, I have discovered that at the Olympic level, many athletes’ level of self-confidence (and this was similar for both females and males) was quite fragile. The ebb and flow of that self-confidence was linked directly to past performances and the relationship with the coach. I found that when competition was going well and they were performing well, many athletes felt quite confident in their abilities. When they were working well alongside their coach, had a trusting and respectful relationship, and had confidence in the training program, then they also described themselves as confident. But for many of those athletes, when one of those components was missing, so was a significant degree of self-confidence. Neal Marshall said that he had great confidence in Ingrid Paul’s training program and great confidence in her ability. He felt she was as committed to success as he was, and all of that translated into personal confidence.

Asking Questions

I have already mentioned the usefulness of asking questions to ensure that you fully understand what the athletes are saying, thinking, and feeling and what they may

want and need from you. Be careful with assumptions, because they almost inevitably lead to poor decisions and conflict.

Tannen adds another dimension to thinking about questions when she writes that “although asking the right questions is one of the hallmarks of a good manager, how and when questions are asked can send unintended signals about competence and power.” Many boys are socialized to be aware of the power dynamic of asking a question; the asker can be seen to be in a “one-down” position. Often, men feel they lose face by asking questions, and Tannen cites the well-worn example of men being less likely than women to ask directions when they get lost. As well, as Tannen so aptly puts it, “men who believe that asking questions might reflect negatively on them may, in turn, be likely to form a negative opinion of others who ask questions in situations where they would not.” This was clearly the case when a woman coach mentioned that she asks questions of her mentor coach to fully understand what is going on, but he perceives this as a weakness on her part and infers that she “must not know very much.”

Within the sporting context, what solutions might there be to resolving how and when to ask questions? Awareness that gender differences may exist is the first step. If you are coaching male athletes, be aware that they may not be comfortable asking a lot of questions; therefore you need to create an environment where they feel comfortable articulating what they might be feeling and thinking and worrying about. An individual meeting rather than a group setting might be necessary.

At the same time, many male and female athletes at the Olympic and world championship level are not at all reluctant to ask questions. Elaine Dagg-Jackson, coach of numerous successful women’s and men’s curling teams, including Kelley Law’s 2000 world championship team, Dean Joanisse’s British Columbia team, and Team Japan for six years, sees few differences between women and men at the elite level of competition. “Both want to know everything. The men might need to know a bit more about why we are doing something, and it might have been initially a bit harder for me to gain credibility, but it is more about the readiness and maturity of the athlete than gender.”

Danièle Sauvageau, coach of the national women’s hockey team and former assistant coach of the Montreal Rockets, found that both male and female athletes ask questions. However, the men’s questions are often simply related to how they are going to do something, partly, Danièle feels, because they have been playing hockey for so long. The women often need to know why the team is doing a particular type of training or why such a decision is being made, and the questions are often related to their role on the team and their role in relationship to their teammates. Danièle’s observation supports Tannen’s findings that women strive for connectedness and closeness in their lives.

The Rituals of Apologies, Feedback, and Opposition

According to Tannen, women tend say “I’m sorry” more frequently than men, but often what they mean is “I’m sorry that happened,” not “I apologize.” Women are often simply lending concern and empathy to the other individual; this is a way to establish a connection. Many men avoid apologies because they see them as putting the speaker in a “one-down” position. What is to be done? It is important to first realize the differing ways women and men think about apologies. Then you must reflect on how often and how quickly you apologize yourself. It can be appropriate

and powerful to apologize and take responsibility for your actions if you did indeed make a mistake. Certainly as a coach, you have a huge role to play in modelling self-responsibility. But it is crucial that you not apologize too quickly. You need to gather the facts and determine your role in whatever happened. Otherwise, you may end up apologizing for something you did not do and, as a result, be seen as less confident and less trustworthy as a coach.

Concerning feedback, Tannen states "... styles of giving feedback contain a ritual element that often is the cause for misunderstanding." Giving and receiving feedback is an essential part of all relationships and your preferred style as a coach needs to be clarified with your athletes and with colleagues you might be required to critique or evaluate. Do you like to mitigate your critique of an athlete's training or race/game performance with praise, or do you like to simply critique what could be improved? Tannen argues that many women tend to give feedback in at least two parts: first, by talking about what is positive and then by critiquing the problem or issue. This is a very effective way of giving feedback, but Tannen suggests a problem can arise if the individual receiving the feedback does not clearly understand or listen carefully to all of the feedback. Because women athletes in general tend to be self-critical, two-part feedback can be effective. Perhaps one of the best ways to avoid problems is to simply ask for the preferences of each athlete, female and male. Knowing what kind of feedback each athlete wants and acting in accordance with that information goes a long way toward becoming a very effective coach.

Elaine Dagg-Jackson knows that both her women's and men's teams at the national level are ready to listen and want to know everything and anything that will help them be better. "The important thing is delivering the message in a positive way," she says.

Moira D'Andrea, national development team coach in long track speed skating, and coach of Cyndy Klassen, bronze medallist in the women's 1500m at the 2001 world championships, says she prefers to treat each of her athletes as individuals, rather than along gender lines. "In thinking about feedback, some want only the critique. Other athletes want some of the things they are doing well, as well as the critique."

Margaret Langford, three-time Olympian in white water kayak and world cup silver and bronze medallist in 1997 and 1998, feels that while there are fundamental differences between female and male athletes, when it comes to feedback "... I personally want the direct information, the facts."

Susan Auch, one of our most successful speed skaters and silver medallist in both the 1994 Lillehammer and 1998 Nagano Olympic Games, is perceptive in her preparation for racing and in her understanding what she needs in terms of feedback. "I want the whole texture – focused on how I feel." She also believes, as Margaret Langford does, there are fundamental differences between female and male athletes. "Male coaches often don't understand women athletes. They sometimes have a hard time seeing what is really happening. A woman coach would be much more in tune with the thought processes of women."

Opposition, the final key concept of Tannen's that we will look at, illustrates what might be called a classic difference between female and male behaviours. Women often take arguments too literally and certainly too personally. Men can have an argument, challenge each other loudly and vehemently, and then later that day, act like nothing ever happened. Male athletes training and travelling together can follow

a similar pattern. As a sport psychologist with women's teams and men's teams, in individual and team sports, I probably spend more time working through issues and difficulties with the women, although there has been a shift in recent years as male athletes are starting to talk more about concerns within the team. What I attempt to do, regardless of gender, is use those sessions as an opportunity to build the group into a more effective team through the arguments and discussions that arise. It is definitely not wasted energy. Given time, some specific skills, and the willingness to work through an issue, the group actually grows into a much stronger team.

Finally, what to do with all this information about the differing communication styles of women and men? Awareness of how the conversational styles of women and men differ makes it easier for you to ensure that each athlete has a voice and is heard by you and by the other athletes on your team. There really is no one best way to communicate, but understanding your own personal communication style and preferences, and then listening for the style and preferences of others, will go a very long way in improving the effectiveness of your coaching and the success of your athletes.

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