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Gender issues: Effective workplace communication

Posted by Dr Anton Franckeiss in [Managing people](#) on Tue, 29/03/2011 - 09:08

Gender is one of the most obvious differences in any group of employees, and an undeniable one: men and women aren't just physically different, but grow up influenced by (and largely endure) different social conditioning.

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But while each of us has a gender, we also have a nationality and/or race, a set of personal beliefs, a cultural background, a sexual orientation, a hair colour, possibly a faith: a whole set of attributes, none of which, on their own, defines us.

If research around the impact of communication has anything to say, it's that the language or words we use - as men, women or any other slice of the demographic cake - have little to do any difficulties we may have in understanding each other. What makes the difference is the way we communicate, which has everything to do with Emotional Intelligence (EI), interpersonal skills, preferences, state of mind, and so on. The need to accept differences and avoid taking them as attempts to frustrate or undermine is vitally important. In the context of work, few of us have the luxury of serving simply our own needs and ends; achieving the team or the organisations goals means we must learn to recognize, accept and work with the preferences and personalities of our colleagues. It also means we must recognise and accept our own, and learn when they need to be adjusted or moderated.

Describing a need to be 'bi-lingual' on gender lines does the topic an injustice: the biggest challenge is the narrow mindedness of people assuming that the biggest difference automatically lies between men and women. This is an unhelpful simplification that distorts rather than clarifies: supporting 'understanding each other' is an age old dilemma that goes far beyond gender. The popularisation of a focus on 'gender differences' can skew our perception so that all other areas of difference have less visible impact. Organisations should be working towards a common voice, purpose and motivation. We should be a choir, receptive to other voices as well as our own and working together, not a group of soloists competing to be heard.

The answer lies in learning to work with diversity in all its forms (if you can't accept someone else's input, why expect them to accept your output?), and in basic Emotional Intelligence. Staff need to take time to understand how others work, know how they work, and adapt their styles, regardless of sex, colour, background, etc. A leadership and management style that emphasises the strengths that can be derived from diversity and respects all inputs sets a powerful example.

By Dr Anton Franckeiss is Managing Director at ASK Europe

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