

# Co-operantics

## Co-operative skills for everyone

### Gender and communications at work

*Women are talking, we do not understand,  
they speak in a language we cannot comprehend ..  
David Byrne, Women vs Men (Bolero, 1989)*

In her book 'Talking from 9 to 5 - Women and men at work: language, sex and power' Virago Press 1994, Deborah Tannen explores the different conversational styles and rituals used by women and men at work, and the confusion that arises when those styles and rituals are not recognised as such and taken literally.

Conversational styles common amongst men include banter, joking, teasing and playful put-downs. Men will try not to end up in a 'one-down' position in any conversation. On the other hand, women's conversational rituals often involve trying to maintain equality, downplaying their own status in order to move on without appearing to 'flex their muscles'.

Tannen says that when such rituals are recognised and acknowledged, they work well, but when they are taken literally misunderstandings may arise. Male oppositional banter can be interpreted as hostility, and when women use conversational styles designed to avoid looking boastful, they can be seen as less confident and competent than they really are.

For many women – and some men – saying “I’m sorry” is not always meant as an apology, but as a way of saying “I sympathise”. When it is meant as an apology, it is often offered as the first step in a two-way ritual: I say I’m sorry, then you say I’m sorry too – thus we are sharing half the blame each, a mutual face-saving device, which avoids leaving the apologisee in the one-down position. However if my apology is taken literally, and you respond with “I accept your apology”, then my attempt to achieve balance has misfired and I have been left in the one-down position.

Tannen makes the point that no one style or ritual is better. Problems arise when styles differ and when rituals are not recognised. If it is not recognised, a style which involves not boasting, making no effort to hide your ignorance or mistakes, appearing to take the blame even though it is not deserved, will work against the speaker.

#### **What Can Be Done?**

Tannen does not suggest that women or men change their conversational styles or rituals, only that we recognise them and become more flexible not only in our own communication but also in interpreting other people's meanings.

Evaluation of meetings can supply an opportunity for people to discuss how well communication is working, and raise everyone's awareness. The chair should make sure that all contributions are welcome and should avoid stating their position before others have spoken. For more information, check out Deborah Tannen's website at:

[http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/tannend/book\\_you\\_just\\_dont.html](http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/tannend/book_you_just_dont.html)