



BY PATRICIA POPE

Overcoming Diversity Barriers To Communicate Clearly



Most of us recognize how challenging it can be at times to communicate effectively. Listed below are some barriers to effective listening and communications. Ask yourself which ones you may need to work on:

- I finish other people's sentences because I assume I know what they are going to say.
- I tune out pretty quickly when I detect an unfamiliar accent.
- I am usually waiting to hear something I disagree with....then I interrupt and begin a debate on that point.
- I tend to give a lot of unsolicited advice.
- I "fake" listening a lot....I nod my head to give the impression I'm listening, but I'm really thinking about something else.
- I "shut down" when someone else's communication style is very different from my own (for example, too analytical, too detailed, too "animated," speech pattern too slow or too fast, etc.).
- I shut down when others use "absolute" statements like: always, never, all, none, etc because in my mind the other person is overstating the situation and being illogical.

As difficult as these challenges are for many of us, they become even more complicated when we are communicating with someone who is different from us in terms of nationality, gender, race/ethnicity or age.

There is some fascinating research that has been done in recent years that deals with gender brain differences. This research reveals that women and men are "hard-wired" differently in several key ways.

We've all heard about the right and left hemispheres of the brain. One significant difference that affects how men and women communicate is that women have speech and language areas in both hemispheres of the brain, whereas men's speech and language areas are only in the left hemisphere.

Consequently, little girls generally talk sooner than little boys and boys are more likely to "stutter." Men, on average, tend to use approximately 7,000 words per day, while women, on average use 20,000. Thus, in the workplace, men often perceive women as providing far more "detail" than men want or think is necessary. While women may walk away from a meeting feeling frustrated because they sense that the men weren't listening, the men may walk away wondering why it takes women so long to just "get to the point."

In our increasingly global business place, learning how to deal with each others accents and cultural speech patterns is frequently cited as a significant concern in many organizations. Years ago, one company created a new internal training program called, "Accent Reduction Training" which was mandatory for all non-U.S. born employees. A more "balanced" approach to this communication dilemma would have been to also offer "accent apprecia-

tion training" for U.S.-born employees!

One executive assistant would come into her manager's office, saying "Can you take this call?"

The person on the line has such a strong accent, I can't understand

what he is saying!" Her manager would take the call and be surprised that rarely did she have a problem understanding the caller. She realized that the problem was that her assistant became so "anxious" as soon as she detected an accent, that she assumed she wasn't going to be able to understand what the person was saying. Her manager, on the other hand, focused harder on "listening" and trying to "tune into the cadence" of the caller's accent, and by doing so, usually didn't have the same difficulty communicating with someone from a different nationality.

Diversity is so much more than simply race and gender. Our communication styles are also a dimension of difference. It's easy to overlook those who are shy or quiet in meetings and not seek out their input. Remember, people add value when they feel valued. Here are just a few ways we can all foster inclusion in our organizations, especially in meetings.

If you are talkative, make a real effort to not always be the first one to jump into a conversation.

Pay more attention to the non-verbal behaviors of those who tend to be quieter in meetings. Ask for their input.

Be more sensitive to the fact that English isn't the first language for everyone on the team, and accept the responsibility for "slowing down the conversation" if needed. What those in the U.S. who only speak English typically don't understand is that for those whose first language is other than English, they often think in their "native" language, and then have to mentally translate that thought to English in order to communicate in meetings.

Give everyone on the team an opportunity to take a turn leading some portion of the meeting so that he or she gets more comfortable speaking in the meetings.

Take the initiative to ask what some of the others' thoughts or opinions are if it seems that most of the talking is being done by the same people.

Practice being more assertive in meetings, occasionally being the first one to talk when a question is thrown out to the group.


Be sensitive to the use of "cultural clichés and jargon" that may be unfamiliar to those from other cultures. In a training session some years ago, a woman from China shared that she was often "lost" because of all the clichés that Americans use. For example, she said we often use the term, "The grass is always greener on the other side." Her question was...."On the other side of what?" Once the meaning of this cliché was explained to her, she smiled and said, "In Hong Kong, we say 'Your neighbor's rice is always tastier!' Same thing, right?"

Keep in mind that one of the principles of inclusion is "If we don't proactively work to include, we unintentionally exclude." Given that most of us spend an incredible amount of our time in meetings, they represent a great opportunity for each of us to practice being more inclusive of others.

In a recent analysis of respondent data to a question in our EDGE Advantage e-learning program, between 10-50 percent of participants taking the course

agreed that productivity could be improved within their workplace by up to 50 percent—yes, 50 percent—that's a huge number—if barriers were reduced.

Barriers in the workplace come in many forms and shapes. We can all do our part to proactively reach out and include others, and remove barriers as we leverage our differences for competitive advantage.

PATRICIA POPE is CEO of Pope & Associates, a global consulting firm that has specialized in diversity, inclusion and culture change since 1976 (www.popeandassociates.com). She is also co-owner and co-founder of Myca-Pope, a company formed in 2002 to convert Pope & Associates' 32 years of intellectual property into e-learning/Web-based training programs and assessment tools. She is a member of the Enterprising Women National Advisory Board. 

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Leslie Frécon is founder and Chief Executive Officer of LFE Capital, a private equity fund manager based in Minneapolis that offers flexible financial solutions to companies with strong growth prospects. A relationship with LFE Capital brings expansion or buyout capital and an operations-oriented investor who will dedicate the time and resources required to help management teams build successful businesses.

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