

How do Women Manage?ⁱ

Based on an original article entitled 'Women at Work: Analysing Women's Talk in New Zealand Workplaces' by Janet Holmes

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New Zealand has a woman Chief Justice, a woman Prime Minister and Governor General, and a woman in its top corporate job at Telecom. Although still not an everyday occurrence, women appear finally to be making it the top of their professions. But in terms of communication strategies, how are they managing? In the Wellington Language in the Workplace project at Victoria University, we have been looking at this question by examining the language used by effective women managers in various New Zealand workplaces. This article summarises some of our findings.

Opening a meeting

If I asked you "who starts a meeting?", the answer is obvious- the chair. In fact when managers open a meeting, they are doing more than just starting things off, they are also asserting their role as chair. But have you ever thought about exactly how they do this? It is often done by using phrases such as *right*, *okay* and *we might as well start*. Do women managers do this any differently? Our findings suggest not. Here are some examples which show that the women managers in our study indicated the beginning of the meeting very clearly, often with a statement that overtly marked a transition from pre-meeting talk to the meeting proper.

Example 1 *Context: Meeting of mixed gender senior management group of nine people.*

Penelope: okay well now we'll start properly (pause)

Example 2 *Context: Regular reporting meeting of 2 men and 2 women*

Jan: okay (pause) um shall we just start with our agenda (long pause)

With larger or noisier groups, the manager sometimes needed to be more assertive, as in example 3.

Example 3 *Context: Meeting of mixed gender team of twelve people.*

Clara: okay (pause) thank you (long pause) stop talking now (pause) we're going to start (long pause)

It may surprise you to realise just how important these little phrases are. But in terms of establishing who is going to direct a meeting and (hopefully) keep it on track, they count for an awful lot. Opening a meeting was one way that the effective female managers in our study used to maintain control of meetings at work. But they also used other strategies.

Amount of talk

People have very specific ideas about how much women talk in meetings. Earlier research has shown that in groups where both men and women are present, men typically talk more than women. And maybe your own informal observations in your workplace support this finding. However, have you ever thought about the idea that this may be because the chair is usually male, and senior in status? It's possible that how much you talk in a meeting actually reflects your role and power in that meeting, rather than your gender.

Our recordings included a large number of meetings where the chair was a female manager. So we were able to look at whether the female managers dominated talking time in meetings. We found that the women managers consistently dominated the talking time when they were in the chair. In other words, it seems that your role in the meeting is more important than your gender in determining how much you talk. If you are chairing the meeting, you're likely to talk more in order to 'control' the meeting, and because of your status you may also give your opinion more freely.

Summarising

Have you ever come out of a meeting feeling frustrated because you didn't seem to cover what was on the agenda? As you are going through a meeting, it is really easy to lose direction or go off on tangents. We've all been in meetings like those!

Summarising progress is a communication strategy that the chair can use to keep the progress of the meeting on track. It also allows the chair to let everyone know how they have interpreted what has happened so far, and can avoid potential misunderstandings later in the piece. Obviously summarising as you go is an important management strategy in a meeting, so it is not surprising that the effective women managers in our group were adept at this skill. Here is just one of many examples.

In the following example, Barbara and her manager, Ruth, are discussing how to deal with a questionnaire Barbara has to fill in on behalf of their organisation. After talking through possible responses, Ruth provides her view of what has been agreed.

Example 4 *Context: Meeting between manager and policy analyst*

- 1 Ruth: so where are we at in terms of (pause) I mean you're inclined to want
2 to pull back a little bit
3 Barbara: yeah
4 Ruth: but to find out a bit more from um Rene about just our- one
5 expressing our concerns about the way in which the questions are
6 framed
7 Barbara: mm
8 Ruth: and secondly about what control we'll have over the way in
9 which the information might be used
10 Barbara: mm
11 Ruth: those are the two main things eh

Ruth summarises the first point in lines 1-2, 4-6, the second point in lines 8-9, and then makes the fact that she has done this quite explicit in line 11.

So far we've looked at the communication strategies which could be considered relatively overt and direct management strategies (and which may be more stereotypically associated with male ways of management): deciding when a meeting will start, talking more, and letting everyone know what you understand to be the progress in a meeting. But the women managers in our study also used less direct ways to manage meetings in their workplaces.

Consensus

In contrast to those meetings where discussion meanders around, and the agenda is not covered, there are also meetings where the agenda is ploughed through, regardless of whether people agreed to the decisions or not. And while a quick decision may seem very time efficient, if there is dissension, it's likely to cause many more problems down the track. However this did not seem to be a problem in the meetings in our research. One very distinctive characteristic of the style of many of the women managers in our study was their skill in "negotiating consensus". They often took specific steps to ensure that participants had genuinely reached agreement before moving on to the next issue or agenda item. In fact when someone had expressed a contrary view, or a reservation at an earlier stage in the

discussion good managers would quite explicitly seek that person's views on the decision which was being considered.

One very clear example of negotiating consensus involved a forty minute discussion at a regular team meeting . The team was discussing the allocation of responsibilities in relation to a range of tasks. These intersected with complicated staffing problems relating to loss of personnel, problems caused through sickness, and so on. Filing had become a particular problem, as the departmental filing had got severely behind. A number of possible solutions were discussed, some involving complicated re-assignment of duties. One possible solution, first proposed at a relatively early point in the meeting was to bring in external filers, "the flying filing squad". A relatively senior team member, Zoe, was clearly not happy with this suggestion, and throughout the discussion she raised a variety of objections to it whenever it re-emerged, as it regularly did.

The manager, Leila, encouraged extensive discussion of the issue and its impact on related issues. Throughout the meeting she quite explicitly encouraged the discussion of any problems that participants could perceive, and sought agreement from all those present to any suggestion. Finally she checked that all were happy with the proposed solution. Example 5 provides some instances of how she explicitly sought consensus.

Example 5 *Context: Meeting of 6 women to sort out systems problems*

- 1 Leila: I mean we may not be able to find a solution but that
- 2 I mean you're the people who are in the best situation for knowing that
- 3 what's your feeling?
-
- 4 Leila: I want people to be honest about whether they
- 5 if they don't you know even if things come up again
- 6 now if you don't feel comfortable say so
-
- 7 Leila: you need to work that through it's gonna be (pause)
- 8 you know what will work (long pause) 'cause I mean
- 9 I think you've got a wee bit of a difference here
- 10 in that you're obviously a little bit uncomfortable about a new set of
- 11 people and I can understand that because you're thinking consistency
-

- 12 Leila: does this feel okay I mean I don't want anyone to feel that (6)
13 records are ()
14 [general laughter] ...
15 Leila: and that means then flying filers (4)

Leila's strategies of clearly stating and re-stating the contentious issues (lines 9-11), requesting people to make explicit their reservations (lines 4,6, 7) and overtly seeking agreement before proceeding (lines 3,12) resulted in a satisfactory conclusion. The final resolution of all the staffing issues leaves the team feeling very positive as indicated by a good deal of collaborative and mutually supportive humour at the end of the meeting (see example 6 below).

Speaking of humour leads us to another area which emerged as a characteristic of the meetings involving our female managers.

Humour

Women in workplace settings are stereotyped as having a poor sense of humour. Does that fit in with your experience? It certainly didn't fit in with our findings. The women managers in our sample regularly used humour as one strategy for managing workplace interactions. In fact, an analysis of 22 meetings from a range of workplaces, indicated there was more humour overall in the meetings chaired by women than those chaired by men.

One of the reasons for people's use of humour seemed to be to help with good relationships in the workplace. They also encouraged collaborative humour, where everyone builds on a humorous theme together. Here's an example of this from a meeting in a government department in which an imaginary scenario is created concerning an all-purpose suit which could be used by anyone unexpectedly summoned to see the Minister. Leila is the chair of this meeting.

Example 6 *Context: 3 colleagues at afternoon tea in manager's office discussing the problems which arise when someone is unexpectedly summoned to see the Minister*

- 1 Eve: I think we need a ministry suit just hanging up in the cupboard /[laughs]\
2 Leila: /you can just\ imagine the problems with the length /[laughs]\
3 Eve: /it would have\ it would have to have an elastic waist

- 4 so /that we [laughs]\ could just be yeah=
5 Leila: / [laughs] yes that's right [laughs]\
6 Eve: =bunched in for some and [laughs] let it out
7 Leila: /laughs\
8 Eve: =out for others\
9 Les: and the jacket would have to be /long to=
10 Leila: /no I'm quite=
11 Lesley: = cover all the bulges\ /so\
12 Leila: =taken with this now that\ that is very nice
13 Eve: /[laughs]\

All three participants contribute to the humorous fantasy, though Leila's role is largely supportive, providing comments which indicate enjoyment of the fantasy and endorsement of the idea *yes that's right* (line 5), *I'm quite taken with this, that is very nice*. (lines 10,12). The effect is one of high energy, good humoured, enjoyable interaction. Leila, the manager, is here clearly encouraging collaborative humour, and contributing to the construction of good relationships at work.

The final word

Our study of effective women managers in New Zealand workplaces has allowed us to comment on some interesting communication strategies. It seems that these managers use language in ways that help assert their power in a meeting setting by clearly signaling the start of meetings, talking more than other participants and by summarising progress in a meeting. But they also use strategies which may have less immediate, more long term effects in a workplace. They negotiate consensus on contentious issues which may take longer at the time, but which may avoid dissatisfaction and rebellion amongst colleagues at a later date. They also use humour in meetings to establish a friendly and collegial atmosphere in the workplace. In short they were firm and authoritative when necessary, but also made use of more facilitative strategies. Whether these features also characterise the interactions of effective male managers in New Zealand is the next item on our research agenda.

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