



## When it comes to words of leadership, culture makes the difference



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**D**O WOMEN and men in leadership roles talk differently in the workplace? A recent book by Judith Baxter, *The Language of Female Leadership*, suggests that women leaders face more constraints than men regarding what is considered acceptable workplace discourse. Women are judged more harshly when they use direct, authoritative language, she suggests, and they are often labelled bossy, mean or bullying for linguistic behaviour which would go unremarked from a man. And swearing is generally considered inappropriate for women in the workplace. On the other hand, Baxter also claims that the language of female leadership is "a more linguistically expert, diverse and nuanced version (than men's), finely tuned to colleagues and context".

Our New Zealand research suggests that factors other than gender are generally more important in accounting for the way people talk at work. Perhaps most important is the workplace culture.

Swearing is totally unacceptable in many white-collar workplaces – but not all. We have examples of both women and men using swear words even in formal meetings with no indication from their colleagues that this is considered inappropriate. Similarly, the use of a challenging style of disagreement is acceptable in some workplaces, while in others it would cause offence. Different workplaces develop different patterns of interaction and establish their own norms, which newcomers must learn if they want to fit in.

Another area where interactional conventions differ in different

workplaces is the amount of small talk and the usual topics for such talk. In all the New Zealand workplaces where we have recorded, small talk is usual during the period before a meeting starts. New Zealanders don't like leaving a silence during this waiting time (though research by a Japanese colleague indicates that silence is perfectly acceptable while waiting to start a Japanese business meeting).

Weekend activities and holidays are common small talk topics in most workplaces. In some, the period before the meeting is regarded as a chance to catch up on work-related issues with particular colleagues. Sometimes social information about clients and colleagues provides an interesting way of filling in time, while also supplying useful background for those who will be interacting with these people.

The line between business and non-business topics is often rather artificial. A discussion about how someone plans to spend their leave or how long they intend to be away from work may appear social, but for their manager such information has implications for achieving workplace objectives. It was in this area that we did find some rather predictable gender differences. In workplaces where women were numerically dominant, including in leadership roles, family and personal topics tended to be aired more often, while in male-dominated workplaces, sport was more favoured.

Early research on gender differences in interaction suggested that men tended to interrupt women more often than the other way

round. Once again our workplace data suggests important caveats on such bland generalisations. Who effectively interrupts who is generally a matter of power rather than gender.

A teacher can always interrupt a pupil, and parents readily interrupt their children. The formality of the context is another relevant factor. The chair of a meeting can interrupt any speaker, for example, while it is much less acceptable for others to do so.

Cultural norms are also relevant in this area. Interrupting a speaker on the marae is totally unacceptable in most circumstances; a speaker usually has the right to state their views uninterrupted, however long that takes. In New York Jewish culture, on the other hand, interruption is frequent, and regarded as a sign of engagement with the discussion.

Returning to Judith Baxter's claims about women and men in leadership roles, our New Zealand research has found, as hers did in Britain, that, regardless of gender, effective leaders are very skilled at achieving both transactional goals – getting things done – and relational goals – creating and maintaining rapport with colleagues.

Good leaders know the interactional "rules" or conventions of their own particular workplaces, and they make effective use of small talk, interruption, and many other interactional skills to get the job done, while also nurturing good interpersonal relationships at work.

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