

The Advantage of Gender Diversity

"Congratulations! Is it a boy or a girl?"

By Danaë Huijser¹, 2010

Gender role systems are at the core of our cultural norms. From the minute we are born, we are labelled. Our gender identity develops with age and we learn to adopt a communication style that fits our role perceptions.

Men and women prefer different styles in communication. Different style preferences can cause miscommunication, influencing the effectiveness of teams in the workplace. Being aware of your own style and differences in styles will help you to find solutions and cooperate more effectively.

This article approaches gender diversity as an advantage. By putting differences in perspective I hope to enable you to enhance team performance by embracing various styles.

Introduction

We all encounter situations in which what we say does not have the expected effect. This often happens in situations where we interact with people who have a different style of communicating, as occurs daily when we communicate with the other gender. Our natural reaction can be to blame the receiver for not trying hard enough to understand us. However, as it is quite difficult to change other people, it is more effective to use this as an opportunity to learn something about ourselves and how we can use diverse communication styles to our advantage when working in mixed teams.

Gender role systems are at the core of our cultural norms and influence how we perceive the people around us, what behaviour we expect and how we behave ourselves. We develop gender-specific communication styles and rituals that can lead to miscommunication when genders meet.

Communication rituals

In order to achieve effective communication, being aware of your own communication rituals and those of the other gender can be a helpful first step. The trick is simple - in theory: never take rituals that are not your own literally.

A common example is discussing personal problems. When women discuss personal problems, it is often used as a means of expressing friendship. Sharing intimate secrets, fears and problems is a way to bond that has been established among little girls and still prevails in adult women. If men take this bonding ritual literally, and interpret this problem sharing as a request for a solution, women often get irritated as the intention of bonding is completely lost. This is a clear example of a ritual that, if taken literally, can result in serious miscommunication and even conflicts; women accusing men of not listening, and men accusing women of clearly asking for a solution, and then getting upset if they are provided with one.

Most men and women are not aware that they are performing gender specific rituals. An unexpected response from the other gender, such as the male approach to handling

problem discussion by finding a solution, can evoke quite surprising emotional responses to the party that is unaware of the implicit rules and expectations of the ritual. In this example, men are not responding in the manner that women would expect. However, if women are aware of this, they can handle this more flexibly. If a woman wants to discuss a problem with a man, she could indicate if she wants to share it to find a solution together, or if she wants to share it just to get it off her chest. Men can facilitate this process, when confronted with a woman sharing her problem, by asking if she wants his assistance in finding a solution or if she just wants him to listen. As men are not used to share problems just to share, this might be a wise question that will most surely enhance their relationship with women. Making expectations explicit can make a big difference. Be careful not to overgeneralise the idea that 'women never want to find a solution to a problem', as a woman in my training sessions put it: *"if my vacuum cleaner is broken, I want my husband to fix it"*. Problems that women want to 'share just to share' are more often relational in nature (e.g. I believe my friend is not feeling well, but she isn't telling me what's wrong), not so much task related (e.g. my car has a flat tire).

Another example is the heated debate. When men are found in a heated debate with other men - women might even call it a fight - men often are performing a bonding ritual. As young boys, men have established behaviour that encourages openly competing, and most men approach a discussion or fight as an opportunity to show their confidence and dare others. It is perceived as an opportunity to show what they're worth and it facilitates male bonding. Women find themselves surprised when witnessing men who seemed to have a fight a few minutes earlier, back on a friendly note right after. Since women take

this fighting behaviour literally, it can be misinterpreted as a real fight, involving real emotions. However, it is a male bonding ritual that is not to be taken seriously (content wise) and therefore is not emotional at all. It is a fun challenge that ends where it ends, nothing more. However, if women are to be found in a heated debate or fight, one can almost be sure that it is a serious issue, involving deep emotions. These women will not easily step out of the argument to be friends again, this has really touched them and it will take time to re-establish friendship, if at all.

Many more rituals exist that can be misunderstood by the other gender. Generally, men and women also use different rituals when it comes to handling criticism, thanking and apologetic communication, humour and expectations of praise, to name a few.

Rituals at work

Men and women develop different interactive behaviour as children and, as adults, carry those childhood lessons with them to work. In same gender groups, their styles work perfectly fine. However, even in business environments in which all our colleagues belong to our gender, we deal with mixed gender suppliers and customers. In the business context, gender specific rituals are regularly misinterpreted by the other gender. It therefore makes sense to understand how different styles can be (mis)interpreted by the other gender, and to be able to step out of our own frame of reference and stop arguing about who is right or wrong, but take a look at how we can work together more effectively.

It is difficult to step out of our usual way, postpone our automatic reaction that is based on our own frame of reference, what we find 'normal'. Our attitudes are ingrained in our mental maps, and it will take time and

practice to really be able to interpret behaviour correctly (meaning: as was meant by the sender), even if communication styles are based on different assumptions. We respond to other people by what we think, feel and do. It may be hard to change what we think or feel, but we can postpone our automatic behavioural reaction, and ask ourselves: what did I hear, and what was meant? Could there be a discrepancy between the two?

But how do we recognise these rituals? By first learning about our own preferred style.

Underlying assumptions

Knowing about style differences does not help us to be more effective, unless we know the underlying assumptions. Rituals are the expression of underlying assumptions. If we manage to understand these invisible and often unconscious assumptions, we can put diversity to our advantage, not only managing miscommunication, but really improving team effectiveness by strategically using our variety of strengths in communication style.

The Model of Freedom, a tool that structures group preferences into four orientations, helps us to understand underlying assumptions that we tend to take for granted. If we understand these better, we can pinpoint when to use which style in order to be successful. We are then able to use these differences and put them to work to the team's advantage. Implications for business life can be imagined, not only in teamwork, but also in leadership, meetings, decision making, negotiating, influencing and many other interpersonal processes at work.

Structuring and visualising differences

The Model of Freedom (MOF) is a pragmatic tool that categorises and visualises preferred behaviour into four orientations. The aim does

not lie in the categorisation itself, but in helping specific social groups understand where their strengths lie and how they can capitalise on their diversity of strengths if these groups meet in the work context.

An important social group people belong to is our gender. We need to make the distinction between *gender identity* and *gender role*. *Gender identity* refers to our personal identification with either the male or female sex group, our personal identity. *Gender role* is the behaviour we attribute as 'normal' depending on the gender group one belongs to, our social identity. What is 'normal' depends on social and cultural factors. Different national cultures will attribute different expectations of behaviour to the gender roles. However, some general tendencies are universal. These tendencies have to be regarded within a specific scope; we can only state relative differences between genders when we think of them as groups within one culture. The general tendencies are portrayed as two extremes in the Model of Freedom, which is simply caused by the fact that in society, we only have two gender roles, the feminine and the masculine role. Furthermore, the relative distance between the two gender roles will be greater in cultures with a relatively high role orientation, and smaller in cultures with a relatively low role orientation.

I want to stress that these gender roles are not equal to gender identity. It is possible to have a feminine gender identity, but to not (fully) accept the female gender role present in one's culture or society. We learn at a very young age what society finds to be 'normal' behaviour to fit our gender, and we usually adapt to what is regarded 'appropriate' behaviour and communication. Growing up, we are socialised into this gender role, and learn to feel good within that gender role as it becomes part of our identity.

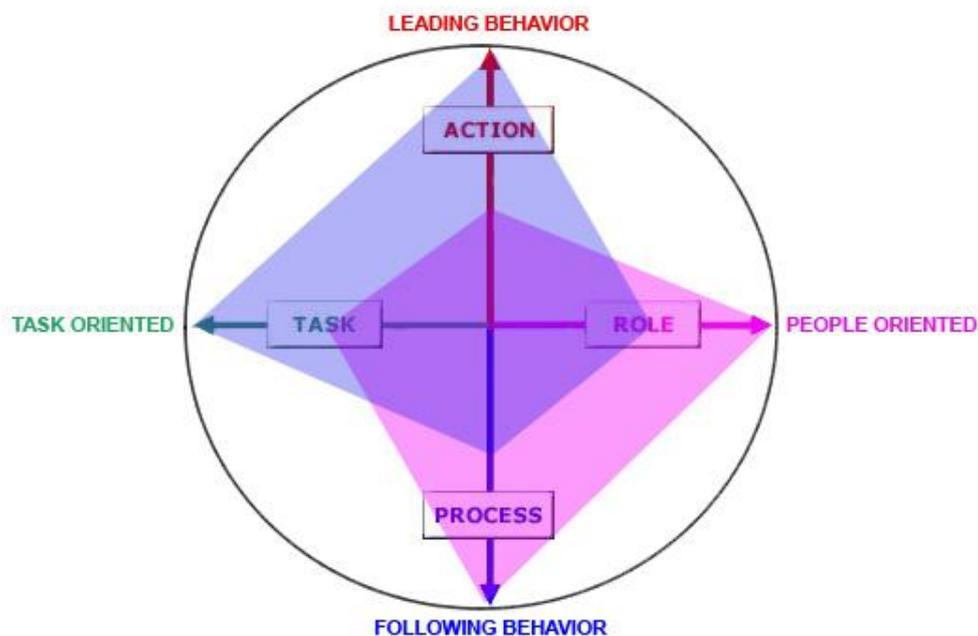
The importance of gender roles lies in two issues.

First, it is important to realise these gender roles exist. As we all automatically (and unconsciously) label people we meet as either male or female, we attribute certain expectations to this person's behaviour based on their gender. People who do not comply with this role are noticed, and often condemned. Depending on the strength of the role orientation of the specific culture, 'feminine' males may be ridiculed – especially by other men, and 'masculine' females may elicit angry responses – especially in other women. This means that adoption is not an option; we cannot look at a person of the opposite gender, copy this behaviour, and

expect similar reactions. When our behaviour is perceived as inappropriate for our gender role and more appropriate for the other gender role, the effects and reactions we find are not the same.

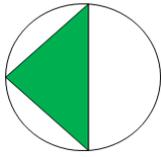
Secondly, if adoption is not an option, it is helpful to understand how the gender roles can be used to our advantage, as they complement each other. Each gender role has its strengths, and in a business context, we can use these strengths strategically to the benefit of the team.

In the Model of Freedom, relative differences between the gender roles can be expressed as follows, the blue pattern representing the male gender role, the pink pattern representing the female gender role.



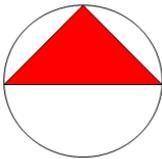
Men are relatively more task and action oriented than women, and women are relatively more process and role oriented than men, within their own culture. We aren't born with these preferences, but we have learned what behaviour fits our gender role, roles we feel good in, and which determine our preferred communication styles.

When these gender roles meet, we can expect differing opinions regarding what is efficient and effective, which can lead to miscommunication, conflict, mistrust and eventually pose a threat on team and even organisational effectiveness.



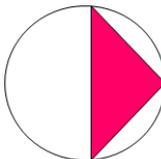
Task orientation

Independent task orientation
Direct communication
Doing it my way – personal responsibility
Conflicts can be productive and are not personal



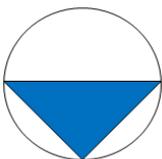
Action orientation

Visible and tangible results are valued
Motivated by individual achievement - competitive
Leaders can be challenged
Decisive
Take risks – just do it
Mistakes are part of life



Role orientation

Interdependent people orientation
Indirect communication
Focus on relationships – shared responsibilities
Harmony is protected – conflicts should be avoided



Process orientation

The invisible and internal is valued (emotional)
Motivated by the process in itself
Leaders are accepted as they bring stability and protection
Complex world – eye for details
Analyse, consult & discuss before doing
Thorough preparation is valued to avoid mistakes

However, these orientations all have their own strengths. If we can manage to recognise these and strategically put them to use, we are creating a high performance team.

Using diversity to our advantage

The four orientations clearly all have their strengths, however, when people with different orientations meet and communicate, the differences can cause tensions. These tensions should not be perceived as problems that need to be solved, but as paradoxes that, if well managed, can create a team advantage.

Let me use an example; decision making in a mixed gender team. To simplify the example, we will only focus on the tension between action orientation and process orientation. What often happens is that people will try to convince each other that only their perception is correct. Instead of looking for the benefits of both, they try to 'defend' their own orientation by focussing on the negative aspects of the other. This happens because people identify with their orientations, and feel that, to preserve their positive self concept, need to defend their own strengths; this is easiest to do by emphasising the others' weaknesses.

But this is only half the story. It is much more effective to explore if the strengths of both orientations could perhaps help overcome the weaknesses of each. To see the complete picture, and step out of the win-lose dynamics, it is important to move to the positive aspects of both orientations and balance these two, dynamically.

For action and process orientation, a simplified map of advantages and disadvantages regarding decision making would look as follows.

+ Action orientation	+ Process orientation
Decisive - just do it	Analyse, consult & discuss before doing - eye for details
<i>“Time is money”</i>	<i>“Time is an investment”</i>
- Action orientation	- Process orientation
Mistakes are made	Relatively slow decision making

We can easily recognise how action oriented people will tend to emphasise the slow decision making of the process orientation, and how process oriented people will tend to emphasise the mistakes that are made in the action orientation. This is not a constructive discussion. It may be better to try to see the advantages of both, and use them strategically. Sometimes, it will be more important to make a fast decision than to make the best one, as a captain who’s ship is sinking will not discuss all options with his crew while water is rising to his knees. In other situations, it may be more important to be flawless, and taking more time for analysis could be a better option, for example in the pharmaceutical industry when a new drug is about to come to market. This is not an either/or choice, but an and/and option. It helps to be aware of the advantages of the different orientations, first to avoid fruitless win-lose discussions and second, to create win-win discussions, and see how and when the advantages of both can be used, depending on the task and the situation.

Looking back at the examples of rituals, it is clear that they are not just coincidental. They are based on deeper assumptions present in the male and female gender roles. For women, conflicts are personal, emotional and cannot be separated from a task, and it is hard to understand how men can have conflicts and be competitive, without feeling personally

attacked or emotional about it. For men, problems are handled with a task orientation, not a people orientation, and it is hard to understand how women sometimes want to share problems without solving them.

Conclusion

When we approach gender diversity as an advantage, and allow different communication styles to exist in parallel, the diversity present has the potential to enhance team performance. In order to benefit from these differences, we need to find a way to better understand each other.

It helps to be aware of the different gender roles that guide our communication style preferences. The rituals that follow from these roles should be avoided in cross-gender encounters, as these can cause misunderstandings as the other gender easily misinterprets these rituals by taking them literally.

We need to move beyond a win-lose discussion and become aware of each others’ strengths and then use this variety of strengths to our benefit. Once we can do that, we can decide how to use them strategically to the team’s benefit and become more effective communicators, team workers, problem solvers, decision makers, planners, leaders, negotiators and innovators.

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