GENDER AND FEEDBACK

*The extract below is from a book that studies (amongst other things) the complex overlay of gender on feedback. For those of you who want a one-page summary, I have reordered the extract and listed the authors' recommendations ("**Implications**") first.*

Implications

So what are the implications of gender role fit between managers and subordinates for providing feedback?

- First, and foremost, we wish to again emphasize that the value of open and direct communication might need to be balanced. In this case, the balance hinges on concerns regarding gender role conflicts.
- Thus, female managers might need to recognize the potential for subordinates to hold negative biases toward them when they assume male roles such as providing discipline or negative feedback.
- Women should realize the need to balance their gender roles and leadership roles. There are a number of ways they might do this:
    - For example, female managers might need to provide feedback assertively, yet in a more nurturing or sensitive way than male managers. That is, they need to integrate some of the expected characteristics of both roles in a given situation.
    - It might also be more important for women to show a caring attitude or in some way legitimize the negative feedback. For example, Brett, Atwater, and Waldman (2005) found that when delivering corrective feedback, positive outcomes were more likely to result for female managers when they allowed recipients to express their views and when they provided the feedback in a considerate way. These behaviors did not impact the effectiveness of the feedback when delivered by male managers.
- Male and female followers should recognize the tendency they might have to apply inaccurate or distorted perceptions of a female manager's abilities, merely based on their gender expectations and without consideration of the female manager's true abilities.
- It would also be helpful if followers could recognize the difficult balancing act female managers face and give them a little leeway.
- Some research suggests that women are sensitive to the need to modify their feedback delivery styles. For example, there are indications from the communication literature that male and female managers might be likely to use different approaches to providing feedback, and might consider different approaches to be more effective:
    - For example, in attempts to resolve conflicts, female managers are more likely to report that they attempt to use soft tactics and affiliative or personal approaches in their first attempts, whereas men report a higher likelihood to use hard tactics, such as pressure or confrontation (Carothers & Allen, 1999; Pruitt, 1998).
    - Women also report that they are more likely to use soft or affiliative approaches to negotiation (Sagrestano, 1992). These results are compatible with those of Eagly and Johnson's (1990) meta-analysis, in which they found that women were more participative and democratic in their leadership styles than men. Men tended to be more autocratic and directive.

BOOK EXTRACT: Leadership, Feedback and the Open Communication Gap by Leanne E. Atwater & David A. Waldman. August 21, 2012, Psychology Press. Pages 46-52

Gender and One-on-One Communication

Demographic similarities and differences between feedback recipient and providers have been the subject of much research. Generally, the literature suggests that demographic similarity should result in more effective communication generally will be more responsive to one another (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002).

Gender appears to represent a key variable relevant to demographic fit. A wide variety of research is relevant to understanding gender as a demographic fit variable in relation to one-on-one communication in organizations. For example, Chung, Marshall, and Gordon (2001) found that male subjects gave less positive feedback to hypothetical female supervisees than to male supervisees exhibiting the same performance. Geddes and Konrad (2003) found that men reacted more unfavorably to negative feedback when it was delivered by a woman.

However, it is not always the case that demographic differences contribute to communication gaps. Women might not react more negatively to male managers, as opposed to female managers, delivering negative feedback (Geddes & Konrad, 2003), and women might not give less positive feedback to hypothetical men than to women when their performance is the same (Chung et al., 2001).

Stereotypes and Expectations

It appears that stereotypes and expectations might be impacting the extent to which gender differences influence communication. Heilman's (1983) **lack of fit** model suggests that expectations about how successful an individual will be in a job are influenced by the fit between the perceptions of the individual's attributes and the perceptions of the job requirements.

Most traits associated with management are generally considered to be masculine (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989). According to the lack of fit model, the skills and abilities perceived to be required to effectively handle masculine sex-typed jobs, such as managerial ones, do not correspond to the attributes believed to characterize women as a group.

Taking a leadership role and providing discipline or negative feedback simply are not activities consistent with a view of women as the gentle and relatively passive gender (Heilman, 1983). For example, in the Atwater, Brett, Waldman, DiMare, and Hayden (2003) study, 85% of respondents, when asked whether discipline was a male or female role, indicated providing discipline was a male role.

Eagly and Karau (2002) extended the conceptualization about gender and fit in their presentation of the **role incongruity theory** of prejudice toward female managers. This theory contends women suffer prejudice when they assume leadership roles because the roles of women and the roles of leaders conflict in many cases. Women are expected to be communal (e.g., kind, nurturing, sensitive, and helpful). Leaders are supposed to be assertive, confident, ambitious, and dominant.

Clearly the expectations of leaders are more closely aligned with stereotypical male traits than female traits. That is, women experience a lack of fit between their leadership roles and their female roles. As such, when women must enact many of the leadership roles they are required to enact, such as giving negative feedback, they must balance others' expectations of women with the expectations they have of leaders.

Men have no such balancing act to manage. The feedback issue between male and female managers and followers becomes particularly problematic when women are in leadership positions and men are their subordinates. Men see management as more traditionally male-oriented in nature than do women, and accordingly, men are more likely to react unfavorably toward female bosses than women (Atwater, Carey, & Waldman, 2001; Stevens & DeNisi, 1980).

This tendency for difficulties to arise when women supervise men stems in part from what Gutek and Cohen (1987) termed **sex-role spillover**. Essentially, sex-role spillover contends that expected roles for men and women in their social interactions spill over into the workplace. That is, because women are expected to be more submissive, and men more dominant socially, these roles will also be expected in the workplace. As such, when men must report to women, the reporting relationship has additional strains because it violates expected male–female interaction patterns.

There might be a tendency for a woman delivering negative feedback to be reacted to more negatively than a man providing the same feedback.

Research has shown that women are devalued when they employ stereotypically male leadership styles (e.g., non-participative; Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Additionally, the communication literature supports the notion that when women behave assertively they are rated more negatively than men, particularly when they are engaging in negative assertive behavior, such as giving negative feedback to a subordinate (Rakos, 1991; Wilson & Gallois, 1993).

One of the interviewees in the Atwater, Carey, and Waldman (2001) study of discipline commented:

> "I think gender had a big part of it simply because she was female. I think she saw me with my stature and stuff and my physical appearance. She thought that this (the discipline) would give her an upper hand to show that she was the dominant person … she always seemed somewhat intimidated by males and I think this was a good deal of it. She relied on the males as far as the technical side so she had to take that attitude."

Another interesting finding from that discipline study was that when women and men delivered discipline, recipients had differing levels of acceptance of responsibility for their behavior:

- When women delivered discipline to men, the recipient did not accept responsibility for his behavior 45% of the time.
- When a woman disciplined a woman, the recipient did not accept responsibility for her behavior 52% of the time.
- However, when a man delivered the discipline, the male and female recipients were unwilling to accept responsibility 37% and 18% of the time, respectively.

Particularly interesting here regarding gender roles is the willingness of female recipients to accept responsibility (88% of the time) when the discipline was delivered by a man.

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Additional Roles and Questions

There are other managerial roles considered primarily masculine, such as problem solving, strategic decision making, and allocating resources (Atwater et al., 2003). Women will need to be sensitive to the conflicts between their gender expectations and their behavior when engaging in these roles.

A particularly intriguing issue is the extent to which role incongruity issues mentioned here might interact with aspects of culture. For example, are the effects of gender–role incongruity especially problematic in cultures lacking gender egalitarianism? In line with Emrich, Denmark, and Den Hartog (2004), we define gender egalitarianism in terms of the extent to which people in a society believe biological sex determines the nature of the roles individuals should play in society. Societies that seek to minimize differences between the roles of men and women at both home and in other settings (e.g., work settings) can be considered to be gender egalitarian.

- For example, societies relatively high on gender egalitarianism include Russia, Denmark, Sweden, and Canada.
- Countries moderate on gender egalitarianism include the United States, Thailand, and Brazil.
- Countries low on gender egalitarianism include South Korea, Mexico, and Middle Eastern countries such as Kuwait, Egypt, and Morocco (Emrich et al., 2004; Friedrich, Mesquita, & Hatum, 2005).

We could expect the role incongruity issue, and its potential negative effects on gender communication, to be most accentuated in the countries that are lower on egalitarianism.

Conclusions

In sum, we can see the dilemmas managers face when deciding when, how, and how much feedback to provide to followers. A number of individual and cultural characteristics must be considered, as well as the interaction of these characteristics when the manager and follower differ.

Takeaways

- Individuals from low-power-distance cultures such as the United States expect more two-way communication before decision are made.
- Managers might need to soften negative feedback when delivering it to individuals from a collectivist culture relative to those from individualist cultures because of the need to save face.
- Be aware that individualists would be expected to avoid failure feedback more than collectivists.
- Those from collectivist cultures do not want to be singled out publicly even for praise. Individualists are very happy to receive public praise.
- Managers would do well to ask subordinates if they mind having their accomplishments announced.

- If the manager comes from a collectivist culture, it is important for the manager to recognize the importance of individual feedback to individualist followers.
- Recognize that collectivists will be less likely to speak directly than individualists.
- It is important for managers to pay attention to nonverbal cues and other indicators when the speaker is from a collectivist culture.
- In a society high on power distance, criticism of the manager constitutes a threat to the social order and the hierarchy and will be more strongly condemned than in a society low on power distance.
- North Americans have very informal communication patterns that are not found in Asian cultures.
- Upward feedback as a leadership development tool will be more readily accepted in the United States and Europe than in Asia or the Middle East.
- When giving feedback to foreign-born employees (a) simplify, specify, and clarify; (b) allow conversation to go back and forth; aand forth; and (c) ask for feedback to ensure that your audience is capturing your message. It is also important to choose simple words and try to avoid slang, figures of speech, and sarcasm.
- Individuals with a high achievement orientation tend to value competence and prefer situations providing opportunities to assess their competence (i.e., situations that provide feedback). Low achievement-oriented individuals tend to respond negatively to competence feedback and would prefer not to receive feedback.
- Extroverts might need to hear negative feedback more than once to really attend to the feedback and alter behavior.
- Female managers might need to provide feedback assertively, yet in a more nurturing or sensitive way than male managers.
- Negative feedback delivered by female managers to men from cultures low on gender egalitarianism (e.g., Mexico, or the Middle East) will be resisted.

Extracted from:

Leadership, Feedback and the Open Communication Gap by Leanne E. Atwater & David A. Waldman. August 21, 2012, Psychology Press.