

## WHAT DO I *DO* WITH THIS INFORMATION?

First, notice the dynamics of how we speak at work. By observing and increasing your awareness, you have choices: First, in how you yourself speak, and second, in how you interpret or judge the speech of others. At the level of personal effectiveness, the goal is to avoid or reduce static and maximize your ability to use the form of speech that is most effective for the situation.

When you see a woman (or a man) using disclaimers, hedges, tag questions, or apology unconsciously, you have options other than to judge her (or him) as lacking ability and confidence. You can “read through” the person’s language and speech habits instead of interpreting them literally and letting them lessen your opinion of his or her abilities or leadership skills. And you can coach the person to see a greater variety of options.

### DOES MAX REALLY KNOW?

I recently saw this awareness enable a breakthrough in a person’s interpretation of the confident language at the masculine end of the continuum. I was coaching a young woman who is a junior partner in a large law firm. She works much of her time with (really under) a more senior partner, a man I’ll call “George,” whose style is directive. (Others might label his style judgmental, bossy, and rude.) She was struggling with the transition from associate (read “employee”) to partner (read “equal”). When I shared information with her about the masculine vs. feminine way people talk, she had a major “aha” moment. She saw that she had interpreted George as truly knowing the right answer and insisting that she follow his direction. Armed with a new perspective, she said, “I now see that this is just George’s opinion! If I disagree, I can push back or offer an alternative idea.”

She had been holding back and passively following George’s direction because he sounded so sure of himself that she felt discouraged from continuing the discussion or disagreeing. With her new understanding, she began to engage with George in dialogue more as an equal. I’ll bet that sometimes her ideas are as good as or even better than George’s.

The next two charts show how static or misunderstandings can arise when we don't understand both masculine and feminine approaches in the area of How We Talk. Think of times you've seen or experienced tension in this area. Consider how your increased understanding of the dynamics at play can help avoid or reduce static.

<b>Feminine Behaviors—Masculine Perspectives: How We Talk</b>				
<b>When Fran</b>	<b>She sees it as</b>	<b>Max may see it as</b>	<b>He may (1 = he is the boss; 2 = he is a subordinate)</b>	<b>A Sage's inclusive response</b>
Uses a disclaimer (admits she is unsure; downplays her idea)	Being honest, not acting "better than"	Lacking confidence or ability, unreliable in a pinch	1. Not consider her for key assignments 2. Judge her as less competent	Build her up, support her ideas publicly
Uses tentative language ("hedges" and "tag questions")	Avoiding being bossy or "one up"; inviting others' agreement	Lacking confidence or ability, unreliable in a pinch	1. Not consider her for key assignments 2. Judge her as less competent	Encourage her to be more direct; appreciate that she seeks input
Speaks briefly, takes less "air time"	Being fair, sharing the time	Not speaking up or not having or caring about her own ideas	1. Not consider her for key assignments 2. Judge her as less competent	Encourage her to expand on her ideas
Waits her turn to speak in a meeting	Being polite	Not having, being confident about, or caring about, her own ideas; being "green"	1. Not consider her for key assignments 2. Judge her as less competent	Ask for her ideas
Expects decisions to be made in (vs. outside) the meeting	Efficient, inclusive, fair	Being naive or unpredictable, causing trouble in meetings	Keep her out of sensitive meetings	Set clear norms for where decisions will be made

<b>When Fran</b>	<b>She sees it as</b>	<b>Max may see it as</b>	<b>He may (1 = he is the boss; 2 = he is a subordinate)</b>	<b>A Sage's inclusive response</b>
Uses nods and animated facial expressions	Expressing her interest	Odd; may read nods as agreement	Think she agrees with him, then feel betrayed if she doesn't	Appreciate her energy and attention

<b>Masculine Behaviors—Feminine Perspectives: How We Talk</b>				
<b>When Max</b>	<b>He sees it as</b>	<b>Fran may see it as</b>	<b>She may (1 = she is the boss; 2 = she is a subordinate)</b>	<b>A Sage's inclusive response</b>
Speaks with assurance on a new challenge	Claiming a stretch opportunity	Exaggerating his qualifications	Question his true abilities	Appreciate his willingness to take a risk
Tells; speaks as if he knows	Showing confidence	Unable to listen and learn	Test him with questions	Include him as a spokesperson
Speaks at length in a meeting	Showing commitment and excitement	Dominating, hogging the time	1. Shut him up 2. Give up trying to participate in the discussion	Interrupt and ask others for their opinions; coach him to be more aware of sharing "air time"

When Max	He sees it as	Fran may see it as	She may (1 = she is the boss; 2 = she is a subordinate)	A Sage's inclusive response
Interrupts in conversations and meetings	Giving his best; using the clash of ideas to get the best answer	Argumentative, rude, not listening to others	1. Conclude he's insubordinate 2. Wait her turn (which may not come)	Allow him to represent her position in a tough controversy; ask others to finish what they were saying
Steals ideas offered by another	Part of a lively game	Unethical	1. Confront him 2. Withhold her ideas	Appreciate when he advances the idea; help him acknowledge the person whose idea he is endorsing
Sets up support for decisions outside the meeting	Good politics; avoiding unnecessary conflict	Underhanded, exclusionary	1. Cut him off from information or her ideas 2. Shut down	Set clear norms for where decisions will be made; value his ability to gather support for his ideas
Uses moderated facial and body language	Relaxed, confident	Cold, unfriendly, hard to read	1. Miss his message 2. Feel invalidated	Let him present tough issues

On the level of leadership effectiveness, we can apply this knowledge to create more inclusive workplace (or other types of) cultures. In inclusive cultures, people with approaches all along the masculine-feminine continuum feel valued and a sense of belonging. By thinking and acting inclusively, Sages create communities where the strengths of both masculine and feminine approaches are understood and leveraged. As a result, engagement and retention are high. In the case of *How We Talk*, inclusive leaders appreciate both approaches; in particular, they understand Fran's way of speaking, do not judge her as lacking in leadership, and do not subject her to double binds when she speaks more like Max.

Here are some ideas for ways to create inclusion in the area of *How We Talk*.

- Introduce training in your workplace on gender differences and how and why men and women sometimes express themselves differently. Ask for discussion on how the information can be used to engage people who might have been less appreciated before.
- If you are someone who has generally used the masculine approach to talk (for example, speaking declaratively and with confidence), notice when you are judging or not fully valuing a more feminine approach (for example, using questions, inviting others' ideas and perspectives). Try to hear the content through the language style.
- If you find yourself judging a man or woman who is speaking in the masculine style, pause and see if you can drop the judgment. You might engage the speaker in a dialogue to probe how certain he or she really is.
- If you are putting a woman in a double bind about her style of speech, notice that. Practice open-mindedness and feeling comfortable with her operating along a broader portion of the continuum.
- If you are talking with a group of women or people who operate at the feminine end of the continuum, try out the feminine approach. Overtly model it. If someone notices, tell that person why you are expanding your repertoire.
- If you have a woman or a man on your team who is slow to speak up, speaks softly and briefly, or gives up the floor when interrupted, overtly support her or him. Unless it makes the person uncomfortable, create a

clearing for an individual like this to speak. For instance, “We haven’t heard from Janice; Janice, I want to hear your insights on this.” Ask her to speak louder. If she is concise but you see a nugget in what she’s said, ask her to expand on her thoughts. If she is interrupted, help her by saying something along these lines: “Jack, let Janice finish. I want to hear what she thinks.” You have not only validated Janice; you have demonstrated a kind of leadership that leverages and engages someone others might disregard.

- When you see someone undermine her or his own effectiveness by using disclaimers and hedges, coach the person. Help him or her speak with greater strength and impact.

What have you tried? What has worked to create inclusive cultures in the area of How We Talk? Please share your ideas and experiences at [www.difference-works.com/book](http://www.difference-works.com/book).

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## BECOMING A SAGE: HOW WE TALK

Bruce is excited to present his ideas on a marketing campaign for the company’s new product, a “green” all-purpose household cleaner. He is in a meeting with Fran, the chief marketing officer, who is his boss. Also in the meeting are four others, including Annette. As soon as Fran has laid out the objectives of the meeting, Bruce jumps in. He enthusiastically describes a television commercial and supporting radio ads and point-of-sale material. Annette likes the idea generally but thinks the commercial may be condescending or insulting to women, the target market for the product. She notices Fran’s face and body posture and feels sure that Fran doesn’t share Bruce’s enthusiasm. (Fran rarely voices a reaction until an idea has been fully discussed by her team.) Annette speaks up and says, “Bruce, this is creative, but I think the way you characterize the key figure could be seen as a bit sexist. I think we could tweak it . . .” Bruce interrupts her, discounts her point, and continues describing the campaign. Annette doesn’t raise her point again.

- Where is Bruce on the continuum?
- How might Bruce avoid problems by thinking more carefully about what Annette has said?

- How would you coach Annette to be sure her voice is heard when she's been dismissed or interrupted?

Post your own answers and look at suggestions from others at [www.difference-works.com/book](http://www.difference-works.com/book).

