



# The Gender Intelligence Chronicles™

## *Changing the Business Landscape*

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## Same Words, Different Language

*By Barbara Annis*

Men and women think differently. We process information differently. But we still speak the same language—don't we? Surely, we can solve our problems just by talking. Actually, talking isn't the complete solution. Sometimes, talking is part of the problem. Men and women communicate differently. Even when we use the same words, we often don't mean the same thing. Most of us have an intuitive sense of this but we don't think about it much. We just carry on assuming the other gender means the same thing and interprets things the same way. We listen to the other gender from our own frame of reference. And we have already seen what kinds of misinterpretations that can lead to.

Without gender awareness, language is part of the problem. Men and women often don't mean the same things when they use the same words. They often don't hear the same words the same way. So what happens? When we communicate, we assume the other sex means the same thing as we do, and hears the same thing as we do. Then we evaluate their reactions from that standpoint. We read into what they say and do. We don't stop for a second to wonder if men, or women, might just be looking at things completely differently. Instead, we jump to conclusions. Or, worse, we miss the message entirely.

*Men and women often don't mean the same things  
when they use the same words.*

*They often don't hear the same words the same way.*

I learned a lesson very early in life about how people can think differently and what kinds of mistakes I could make by assuming people thought the same way as I did. I left my native Denmark at a young age when I got married and moved to Italy. Very few cultures could be as different as those of Copenhagen and Rome. In Denmark, I had grown up in a world where people on the whole were calm, polite and reserved. Danes are very careful not to offend but rather to observe and not take too much "air time." They have a highly developed sense of what's appropriate and believe in good manners. Imagine how I felt when I arrived in Rome with these ideas. When I suddenly found myself immersed in Italian culture, I thought:

- ▶ Why are the Italians so angry all the time?
- ▶ They're constantly fighting!
- ▶ They're so loud! Why can't they be quiet?

It's not hard to see my mistake. I was mapping Italian behavior onto my Danish frame of reference. For the Danish, loudness signals anger, fighting signals a breakdown, and noise is to be avoided. But not for Italians. What a mistake I was making! Slowly, as I got to know Italian culture better and mastered the language, my perspective changed and I started to see Italians from their own frame of reference. After about three months in Italy, I had to throw all my assumptions out of the window. I remember how my thinking changed. I realized:

- ▶ They're not angry. They're passionate!
- ▶ They're not arguing. They really love to talk and debate things.
- ▶ They're not interfering in other people's business. They're being open with each other. They ask about each other's problems because they care and bond that way!

I've often said that men and women would be better off if they actually didn't speak the same language. Maybe then we wouldn't take so many things for granted. We would pay more attention to how we say things and how the other sex interprets what we say. We would try to put ourselves in the other's shoes. We would try out ideas from another perspective. We would stop and think that maybe a certain word, or gesture or way of arguing doesn't mean the same thing for men as it does for women. We wouldn't take it for granted that the other understands our words and we'd make an extra effort to make sure they do.

*Not only do men and women understand the same words differently, they both jump to conclusions about what certain types of reactions mean.*

Are men and women really so foreign to each other? The ones who attend my workshops certainly believe it after they've done the following "communications" quiz. It is a list of common, everyday words and phrases. I ask men and women to write down what they mean. You might want to try it yourself, before you read what men and women each say.

As you'll see, men and women have quite different ideas about the meaning of words that we all use every day. Imagine the confusion and frustration this creates. Not only do men and women understand the same words differently, they both jump to conclusions about what certain types of reaction mean, coming from the other gender. Luckily, there are solutions.

Before I tell you how differently men and women interpret some common words and phrases, please complete the following quiz:

### **Language Quiz**

If you are a man reading this, please complete the section under *He*, and if you are a woman, please complete the section under *She*. Now if you think that you might have the other gender figured out, I invite you to stand in their shoes and complete their sentences.

## How Men and Women Listen

### “Yes !”

HE: What I mean when I use “Yes!” is \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: What I mean when I use “Yes!” is \_\_\_\_\_

### “What do you think?”

HE: I’m being asked to \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: I’m being asked to \_\_\_\_\_

### “What’s the value of building a team?”

HE: I would build a team to \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: I would build a team to \_\_\_\_\_

### “How do you present an idea?”

HE: I would say \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: I would say \_\_\_\_\_

### “How do you argue effectively?”

HE: My approach would be to \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: My approach would be to \_\_\_\_\_

### “What is success at work?”

HE: I experience success at work when \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: I experience success at work when \_\_\_\_\_

### “How do you listen effectively?”

HE: My approach would be to \_\_\_\_\_

SHE: My approach would be to \_\_\_\_\_

Now that you’ve answered this quiz, you’ll get the opportunity to compare your answers with those of thousands of men and women. And when you see how differently men and women look at these statements, you’ll see how those differences create misunderstandings, and learn how to prevent them.

### “Yes”

#### What Men Hear

“I agree. That’s final. Let’s move on.”

#### What Women Hear

“I’m listening. I may not agree, but I’m tracking.”

## The Misunderstanding

For men, “Yes” is the destination. When you’ve arrived there, there’s nothing more to say. For women, “Yes” means the trip has started. For women “Yes” is not definitive. It means there is something going on. It’s a word they associate with a *process*, not an *answer*.

Imagine the number of problems this simple but essential word can cause. Imagine what happens when men hear a woman say, “Yes” when they assume she means what he means, and then sees her react in a way that doesn’t fit that picture. “You never know when yes means yes with a woman,” men tell me. Yet imagine how women feel when they hear men say, “Yes.” They interpret it as an invitation to keep fleshing out a topic, and then find out the case has been closed. This misunderstanding causes confusion, leads to frustration and worse: it ends up reinforcing assumptions men and women already have about each other.

One man gave me the following example: “I was on my way to a meeting and discussed my idea with a female colleague. She said, ‘Yes.’ But when we got to the meeting she turned around and started suggesting revisions.” He felt attacked and ambushed. “I couldn’t believe it! I thought I had her on my side! What on earth does “Yes” mean if it doesn’t mean you agree?” he said. What do men conclude from these kinds of misunderstanding? That women are shifty, that you can never tell what a woman means. And how do they react? By being careful.

*Women, on the whole, are brought up to be polite. One of the ways we’re taught to be polite is to avoid saying “No” outright.*

It’s men’s number one challenge working with women and that’s why. It’s a basic misunderstanding based on gender difference. When a man abruptly closes a discussion with a “Yes,” and a woman thought it was just getting started, the woman feels dismissed. Women also sense it when men are being careful. “Men are not really listening. Men are avoiding and dismissing us,” women say. There is, of course, a cultural factor that exacerbates this whole situation. Women on the whole are brought up to be polite. One of the ways we’re taught to be polite is to avoid saying “No” outright.

I remember a period in my days as a sales executive when I tried to unlearn that habit. Like many women, I have a tendency to avoid a flat “No” by explaining my way around a negative reaction. But I felt this behavior was becoming a professional handicap. I sensed that people found me indecisive. So I practiced saying “No” without giving any explanation. Of course it didn’t work. I haven’t changed. And why should I? It’s futile for women to try to change their style. And it’s futile for men to change theirs. So what should we do?

## The Solution

The solution is to understand what the other means by “Yes” and anticipate the misunderstandings that might come about. I suggest a simple technique I call “Framing and Checking.”

### For men

Check what kind of “Yes” you’re getting. Is it “Yes, that’s final” or “Yes, I’m following you, but let’s explore this a little more”? Then tell women what kind of “Yes” you need. If you tell a woman you need a final answer she won’t feel she’s being brushed off if you aren’t open to more discussion.

**For women**

Frame your “Yes” with some more information so men know what kind of yes they’re getting. Tell them, “Yes. I’m listening,” or “Yes. I see where you’re coming from but I need to talk about it more.”

**“What do you think?”****What Men Hear**

Men hear the question as a call to action. They feel they are being challenged to take a position or make a statement or deliver a decision. So when they answer, they try to deliver something definitive. They give their best bottom line.

**What Women Hear**

Women hear the question as an invitation to talk about an issue, to express their thoughts and feelings. For women, it’s not a one-way street. When someone says, “What do you think,” women hear “Let’s discuss this.” They try to initiate idea sharing. For women giving an opinion is often not as important as getting a discussion going. For women, the whole process counts. Women will wait for the discussion to progress until it’s the most effective time for them to express their feelings on the topic.

*For women, giving an opinion is not as important  
as getting a discussion going.*

**The Misunderstanding**

The potential for misinterpretation here is great. When women react to the question by opening the discussion, men interpret that as “She hasn’t done her homework,” or “She hasn’t thought it through.” They think, “Don’t waste my time! Just give me the bottom line!” Men will see women’s indecisiveness as a sign they lack confidence. When men answer the question, “What do you think?” with a definitive statement and then move on to the next issue, women feel they’re being shut out. Women think, “I don’t want a decision. I want to hear what you think.” They often feel men are being cold and distant when they give them categorical answers to questions, or that they are dismissing them. As one woman told me, “It’s as if men don’t think I can make up my own mind about things. When I ask for an opinion they give me answers and solutions. But I’m not asking them to solve my problems for me!”

When women initiate idea sharing and ask for input, it’s a way of being thorough. It makes them feel that they’re doing their job well. Many women instinctively fear that in rushing to a conclusion, you may overlook things. Most men want to agree on solutions and implement them. They want to be spared the details because the details get in the way of them doing their job.

Many women also feel that building good relationships makes people work better. Asking for someone’s opinion is sometimes as much a way to build rapport, as it is to get an answer. When men react in a way that makes women feel shut out, women are hurt and feel dismissed. They were, after all, extending an invitation to solidify a relationship.

## The Solution

### For men

When women ask, “What do you think?” check the question by asking “Do you want exploration or do you want a definitive answer?” When men ask the question, it’s wise to frame it. Ask, “What’s your considered opinion on this matter? Do you think this is good or bad?”

### For women

When women really want to know how men feel, they have to tell them specifically. They can preface the question, “What do you think?” with a sentence like, “I have a clear opinion, but I want to explore your thoughts first,” or, “I’m brainstorming. I really want us to take a good look at this problem and explore some possible solutions.”

## “Teamwork”

### What Men Hear

For men, teams are primarily a means to an end. The use of teams is to get the job done. If men think they can do a job on their own, they won’t bother with a team.

### What Women Hear

For women, teams are more than a means to an end. They are also an opportunity. To do what? To build relationships and long-term support bases for other projects. Women may not keep a specific team together after the job has been completed, but they hope the relationships built among team members will continue.

## The Misunderstanding

Since men see a team as the way to achieve a specific purpose, they tend to consider teams as temporary, and finite. Since women see teamwork as an end in itself, they think of themselves as engaging in a long-term, ongoing process when they build teams. The misunderstandings between men and women are predictable. Men tend to disband a team when the work is done and women want to use the team as the base for further collaboration. “We had a winning formula,” women say. “We had really started something. Why would we throw that away just because we finished the job?” Men usually see building rapport as a frill. “We’re already pressed for time. Let’s just get down to the task at hand,” they say. But women think the team will be more effective if there is good rapport between members. Without realizing it, men can make women feel as if all their valuable work is just being tossed out of the window, as though their work isn’t appreciated, and they aren’t valued.

*Men tend to disband a team when the work is done and women want to use the team as a base for further collaboration.*

## The Solution

### For both men and women

Team building is one area where all businesses and organizations need to recognize women and men's distinct strengths and try to put both to use. Teams do work better when the members feel their common purpose, when they bond. The rapport that is created through the team can be a useful resource to be drawn on even after the team has achieved its immediate purpose. But, of course, for the team to achieve its goals there must be a sense of action and purpose. Women need to appreciate the value of men's linear, goal oriented approach, and men need to appreciate the value of women's skill for rapport building. Put these qualities together, and you will have a winning team.

### "Tabling an idea"

#### What Men Do

For men, tabling an idea means presenting a finished product, and clearly stating a plan.

#### What Women Do

For women, tabling an idea means the beginning of a conversation. The objective is to get suggestions and input, not just state a plan. Women see it as a way to get a dialogue going.

## The Misunderstanding

When they talk about feeling dismissed by men, many women mention this scenario: "I state an idea. Everyone ignores me and then a man restates it and everyone loves it!" "Tabling an idea" is the classic situation where this happens. Women think the objective is to get the dialogue going. They try to be inclusive of everyone's opinions and to encourage collaboration. But when they do this, men think women are uncertain, unprepared, or unconvinced. They therefore reframe a woman's idea to clarify what was meant, to nail it down.

This situation leaves women feeling resentful, and men feeling bewildered. As one man explained, "One of my female colleagues didn't seem convinced of an idea she put forward at a meeting. I thought it was a great idea. I restated it to support her. And her reaction was that I stole her idea! I don't get it." Women's inclusive style comes across to men as hesitancy. Men conclude that women lack confidence. When men state rather than suggest ideas, women feel men aren't interested in their opinions and women conclude that men are controlling.

*When men state rather than suggest ideas, women  
feel men aren't interested in their opinions and  
women conclude men are controlling.*

## The Solution

### For men

Men can make it clear that they are open to others' input by saying, "This is my idea. I think it's good, but it can always be better. I'm open to suggestions for improvement." They can also improve the "paraphrasing" scenario by saying something like: "Sandra had a great idea, but I'm not sure everyone heard it."

### For women

Women can avoid feeling that their ideas are stolen, with a simple strategy. They can say, "I've thought this idea through, I'm clear on what I want to do, but I want your input." By stating their intentions this way, women "frame" their ownership of an idea.

## "Arguments"

### What Men Hear

Men think arguments are debates confined to the single issue at hand. They don't have anything to do with what happened in the past.

### What Women Hear

Women think arguments encompass a person's character across a spectrum of faults. Women see a pattern and that's what the argument is about. Women see signs of a person's character in what they say, and the arguments become about that, too.

## The Misunderstanding

Women are acutely aware of patterns. Men will see a conflict stemming from specific circumstances, but women will immediately match that up to similar incidents, or even similar arguments from the past. If she saw certain character flaws as responsible for a past situation, she will see them at work in the present situation as well. When women see a person acting a certain way, they tend to attribute it to his or her character. A man will say, "He's behaving like an idiot." A woman will say, "He is an idiot." Women do this because of the way they collect memories. Women remember not only what happened, but also how they experienced an event. And they connect a past feeling to a similar one in the present very quickly.

The men I talk to say they find women's "linking" behavior extremely frustrating. They think women are keeping score cards. Some men feel women are manipulating them when they do this. The truth of the matter is that for men to remember past experiences the way women do, they *would* have to keep score cards. Men hang onto the facts but they don't recall how an incident made them "feel," the way women do.

## The Solution

### For men

Understanding how women view arguments can help men to see the wider picture and perhaps avoid making hasty, and perhaps misguided, judgments about some situations.

### For women

Understanding men's view of "arguments" can lead to a powerful insight for women. Men don't like to be part of the problem; they like to be part of the solution. When women expand an argument to talk about patterns they see, men get extremely frustrated. Women feel they are peeling away the layers of an argument to get to the real root of a problem, but men just feel like they are getting further from a solution, not closer. If women are committed to resolving an argument, they should work on helping men to understand how apparently unconnected events do bear on the issue at hand, and do contribute to finding a solution.

*Men don't like to be part of the problem;  
they like to be part of the solution.*

## "Success"

### What Men Think Success Means

Winning.

### What Women Think Success Means

Winning, *and* being valued.

## The Misunderstanding

Women tell me that the number one reason why they leave their jobs is that they don't feel they're valued for their strengths. Men are perplexed when they hear women say this. What's being valued got to do with success, they wonder? For men, getting a bonus, a pay increase or promotion, is enough to make them feel valued. Winning and being valued are the same thing. Succeeding according to the male version of success isn't enough for women. It's easy for men to miss out on this one. "If I don't say anything about her work, it means she's doing a good job. If she's doing a good job, she's valued," they say. But women don't feel like they're at work *just* to produce results. Results alone aren't enough to give them satisfaction. Women often want their work to matter, and to feel this way, they have to hear it from someone.

## The Solution

### For men

Understanding women's view of success can provide powerful insights for men. It doesn't take much effort for men to make women feel valued. Men just need to open their mouths and say what they think instead of taking it for granted that she understands. Women need to hear they are appreciated. And it's not because they are insecure. It's because for them, success includes being valued by your colleagues.

**For women**

Women need to realize that men don't understand how important being valued is to them. Make some allowances – ask for feedback. Men really may think your bonus or your promotion was enough to make you feel valued.

**“How to listen effectively”****What Men Do**

For men, listening effectively means you should: quietly pay attention, stay focused.

**What Women Do**

For women, listening effectively means you should: actively participate; nodding or occasional interjections demonstrate you're being attentive and following the conversation.

**The Misunderstanding**

Men often think women are agreeing when women are just showing that they're listening. My husband, a lawyer, tells me he used to fall into this trap during jury trials. While making his final address to the jury, he sometimes noticed that some of the women were nodding. He assumed he had them on his side. But during the opposing lawyer's summation, the same women kept nodding. “It seemed to me the same women were agreeing with opposite positions. I had no idea it was just their way of showing they were listening.”

*When women see men sitting stiff and staring while women talk, they may conclude men aren't listening, but they are.*

Men demonstrate their attentiveness by sitting still and watching. Even after seeing hundreds of groups of men in my workshops sit and stare at me while I speak, I still get the impression they're not listening, but they are.

When women see men sitting stiff and staring while women talk, they may conclude men aren't listening, or interested. Men consider it businesslike to listen attentively giving full attention. When men watch women actively listening, they can't tell if the women are just listening, or agreeing. When women turn out not to be agreeing at all, it can leave men confused, frustrated and even feeling like they are being manipulated. “You can never tell what women mean,” they say.

**The Solution****For men**

When listening to a woman speaker, it's useful to offer the occasional nod or vocal feedback. “I see what you're saying,” will do. It doesn't mean you agree or disagree. It just reassures the speaker that you're following her.

**For women**

When women don't see any signs that men are actively listening, they often conclude men aren't listening at all. Some women managers have told me that after a presentation, they make men repeat what they said. Needless to say, this kind of patronizing behavior probably doesn't help. Women should

not assume that men aren't listening if they are sitting still. The best approach is to check. I often ask men if they agree, or if they understand.

### **"The best way to convince is ..."**

#### **What Men Hear**

For men, this means supporting your argument by facts, figures and careful logic.

#### **What Women Hear**

For women it means supporting your argument by personal experience and the experience of others.

### **The Misunderstanding**

Several years ago, I was in an audience listening to gender anthropologist Dr. Helen Fisher talking about the results of some recent research on how men and women communicate. To illustrate one point, she brought up the experience of some of her own friends. "Just last night I heard some friends say," she started. A group of men beside me reacted almost immediately. "What does what her friends say have to do with any of this?" they asked, shaking their heads.

*Men think arguments should be supported by facts, figures, and careful logic.*

Men think arguments should be supported by facts, figures, and careful logic. Women often agree, but they frequently look to personal experience as well. For women, it's a way of being thorough. Women wonder how a solution to a problem might have repercussions in another area. They will weigh a particular decision or strategy against their own experiences, or others' experiences, as a means of exploring ways it might affect people when it's put into practice. When women bring personal experience into it, men think that's irrelevant. Men look for the facts. They react to women by saying, "What's your personal experience got to do with this?" When men say this, women feel they are dismissing them and disregarding their strengths.

### **The Solution**

#### **For men**

Personal experience can be a valuable resource for understanding problems and coming up with solutions. I know many male business leaders who have come to realize this and now actively seek out the input of their female colleagues, just to get their view.

#### **For women**

Logic, facts and analysis are important too, particularly if you're trying to convince a man. Try to combine the two approaches to make a case. Ask the men around you for some input and ideas!

**Take Responsibility**

You might be wondering just where to start when you want to avoid misunderstandings caused by language. I often tell people, "Take as much responsibility as you can when you listen." If you recognize that gender differences create misunderstanding, it's up to you to do something about it. The key is learning to listen actively. When we talk, we want to be understood, but that tends to affect how we listen. While the other person is still finishing their sentence, we are already formulating a reply. We are busier thinking about what we have to say than making sure we understand what the other person is saying. My advice? Listen actively. Change gears. Check to make sure you've understood the person you're listening to and make sure you're not listening through the filter of your own assumptions.

You don't need to memorize the misinterpretations I included in the quiz in this article. They are just examples of typical words men and women misunderstand when they listen to others "reactively" instead of "actively." This article should be like a seed planted in your mind to remind you that when you're listening, you might not be hearing what you think you're hearing.

## About the Author

Barbara Annis, Founder and CEO of Barbara Annis & Associates, Inc. is a recognized global expert in Inclusive Leadership and Gender Initiatives. Her research and consultancy practice is dedicated to removing organizational and leadership barriers by bringing the latest research and thinking on Leadership, Gender Diversity, and Inclusiveness into the workplace, helping organizations turn gender diversity into a powerful technology of success. Her insights and achievements have pioneered a transformational shift in cultural attitudes on the importance of gender unity to organizational success.

Since its founding in 1980, Barbara Annis & Associates has interviewed tens of thousands of men and women, facilitated over 8,000 corporate workshops, and delivered keynotes and executive coaching sessions on Gender Intelligent Leadership across the globe. Barbara Annis first coined the term Gender Intelligence in the early 1990s and developed the concept in her first book *Same Words, Different Language* (2002) and second work, *Leadership and the Sexes*, co-authored with Michael Gurian (2006).

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