

Focus On Communication Style To Enhance Career Success

Women: Don't ask permission, deflect compliments.

Effective career guidance must address fundamental differences in how men and women communicate, says **Linda Travis**, founder/principal of The Brand Renovator in Atlanta.

An everyday example of such differences is the use of turn signals. "On the highway, women use turn signals to ask permission to change lanes," Travis says. "Men use turn signals to warn you that they *intend* to change lanes."

Those differing approaches become more serious in the workplace. Rather than ask permission to take steps necessary for career development, women must learn to chart the best course for advancement, then sell that strategy.

"When a woman decides to be intentional in her career path, she tends to focus on her needs," Travis says. "You must present your plan as, 'This is how the firm can benefit from me taking this career path.' On the flip side, the firm has to be ready to hear some new ideas."

Building a book of business can be more difficult for women, who often find traditional methods a poor fit. "But selling is simply a matter of building relationships, and women are good at that. They should be encouraged to find methods that work for them, and that may not mean playing golf," Travis says.

Travis also notes that seemingly minor communication traits can be career pitfalls. For example, women are more likely to raise their tone of voice in a questioning manner at the end of a statement. The habit raises doubts about their knowledge and competence.

Women also are more likely than men to deflect compliments, for fear of seeming boastful. One solution, Travis says, is to accept praise in a way that acknowledges everyone's contributions: "My team and I are delighted that you were pleased with the results."

Men and women also differ in their use of the word "no." Men are more likely to respond negatively when caught off-guard and less likely to accept the word as a final answer.

"Women need to learn that if you raise new ideas and hear 'no,' don't crawl back into your hole," Travis says. "Recognize that this person may need some time to think about your idea. Serve it up in another way if you can, and pass it by others to see if anyone will champion it."

Travis says another pitfall is the belief that doing one's job well will automatically lead to career success. Instead, women need to take on high-profile assignments, continually add skills, and highlight their achievements.

"It is not about self-promotion for the sake of ego," Travis says. "Women need to make sure that their contributions are recognized, and when they put it in terms of what they have to offer the firm, it isn't boasting." ■