

**MEN START HERE:** Every time another newspaper hits the streets the message is repeated. Men are brutes, women are victims. Men are the dominators, women the oppressed. Men possess absolute power, and it has corrupted them absolutely. Women are powerless, and their suffering demands redress.

Sexual-harassment complaints filed with the EEOC have doubled since Anita Hill testified during Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court confirmation hearings. About 80 percent of these complaints concern "environmental" harassment. In other words, the bulk of sexual-harassment complaints do not involve threats or coercion for sexual favors but have to do instead with speech or behavior that the plaintiffs regard as intimidating or offensive.

Lay aside for a moment the question of whether many of the complaints, legal or rhetorical, have merit. The fact is that their impact on the business world has extended far beyond the chastisement of a few boorish and richly deserving villains. According to a number of experts, the cumulative effect has been to drive a new and disturbing wedge between the genders. Men and women today are working together in greater and greater numbers but straying ever further apart. They don't trust each other. They are not communicating effectively, they are not interacting professionally, and they're not moving forward to get the job done.

This may mean big trouble for American enterprise. A mountain of studies and reports on productive workplaces attests to the conclusion that high performance demands open lines of communication. Communication, in short, is where the rubber meets the road in the battle for economic competitiveness. If half the work force isn't communicating with the other half, we are all in jeopardy.

**The battle of the sexes  
has escalated into a cold war,  
with both sides  
caught in a spiral of hostility and fear.  
This is a climate where teamwork  
is supposed to flourish?**



Frank Frisari

**IS IT  
GETTING  
CHILLY  
IN HERE?  
MEN AND WOMEN  
AT WORK**

**BY BOB FILIPCZAK**

**WOMEN START HERE:** It was a strained encounter. A male co-worker took me aside and spoke in hushed tones that suggested he was about to impart the latest office gossip. What he told me was, in fact, a joke—one that depended on its sexual content for humor. And I knew why he was whispering it to me in a quiet corner of the office: so that a female co-worker couldn't overhear, take offense, and march to the department of corrections (a.k.a. human resources).

The reason I described the joke in that rather awkward fashion is because it wasn't really what most of us would call a "dirty" joke. I told it to my wife and she thought it was funny. I wouldn't hesitate to tell it to most of the people I know, male or female. That "most" is important, though. I wouldn't tell it to my mother—or my father, for that matter. I wouldn't tell it to a child. I wouldn't tell it to my fifth-grade teacher, Sister Therese.

The question is, is there any room for that joke in the workplace? Should I be *allowed* to repeat it in the office, even if I whisper it to a willing listener in a corner?

Have you noticed a certain frostiness developing between men and women in your organization lately? A loss of openness and rapport with your own male colleagues, perhaps? If so, you probably aren't imagining things. Experts say that the "gray areas" pervading our changing standards of allowable behavior have men walking on eggshells—and resenting it. That's creating icy relationships between the sexes.

But at the same time, according to everything we hear from management gurus, companies are supposed to be moving toward more open communication and encouraging more creative environments. Can such environments exist in the face of an ever-increasing chill between women and men?

**'We'd better stop expecting so much of these poor men, because look, we've scared them off.'**



**W**elcome back, the both of you. That divided introduction is intended to illustrate a point. No, not that there are two sides to the issue of sexual harassment.

The point is that men and women communicate differently. The preceding paragraphs on both sides of the aisle were crafted to mimic what Deb Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington and author of *You Just Don't Understand*, describes as a central difference in the communication styles of men and women: Women talk to establish rapport while men speak in order to report.

When women use language, writes Tannen, they do so to develop the relationship between themselves and their audience. When men use language, they do it to tell their audience what they know. That's why a husband gets in trouble when he responds with "Nothing" to his wife's query about what happened at work today. She is seeking to create rapport; he is *reporting* that no significant events occurred. By the same token, the wife who tells her husband literally everything that happened to her at work is likely to find a very bored dinner companion, one who listens distractedly and wonders in growing annoyance when she is going to cut to the chase.

That much said, let's declare forthwith: **Warning! Dangerous stereotypes ahead!** If this article hasn't raised your hackles yet, it probably will. Most of what follows is based on generalizations about males and females. To avoid qualifying every third sentence with a disclaimer like, "Of course, this behavior is not typical of *all* men or women," we will say so, officially, right now: All statements pertaining to feminine and masculine traits, communication preferences or management styles are generalizations based on the opinions and conclusions of people who have studied these matters. No such statement is intended to imply that *all* men or women think or behave in the way described.

### **THE BIG CHILL**

First things first. Our opening premise is that the ongoing national campaign against sexual harassment (whatever its justifications, its virtues, or its beneficial accomplishments) is producing as a side effect a nonbeneficial frigidness in workplace relations between men and women. Does that premise hold water?

Fran Sepler has reason to think so. Says the president of Sepler and Associates, a St. Paul, MN-based training consulting firm: "I have interviewed in the past year about 500 executive men—executives from junior to senior to CEO level—and to a person I hear consistently a reluctant reservation, a fear

and an anxiety about reaching down to bring along women who are subordinate to them." In practice, Sepler says, that anxiety translates into reluctance to serve as a mentor to a woman, to travel with a woman, or even to have a private business lunch with a female subordinate.

Lt. Cmdr. Terry Bickham, commanding officer of the Pacific Area Training Team for the U.S. Coast Guard, perceives a similar phenomenon. "People [have been] walking on eggshells because they didn't want to do the wrong thing," he says (the "wrong thing" being to offend anyone). But many men have been tiptoeing so gingerly that they wind up doing the wrong thing in a different form. The Coast Guard, probably the most progressive of the armed services in terms of its treatment of women, now is trying to correct the overcorrection with training programs stressing the point that women and men are to receive *completely* equal treatment.

For instance, Bickham says, some officers had developed a tendency to leave their office doors open when discussing career options with female subordinates, to avoid any appearance (or charges) of impropriety. The present gender-equality training demands that if the door stays open for a woman, then the door stays open for a male subordinate as well.

Bickley Townsend, senior vice president of Catalyst, a New York-based nonprofit research firm, seconds Sepler's observation about men becoming reluctant to travel on business with women. And that's a relatively mild symptom of what's happening in the corporate world, she adds. Townsend says she spoke to one female executive who, in the wake of the Clarence Thomas hearings, overheard some male board members of her organization vow that they would never hire another woman. (If true, that of course would go beyond the matter of a gender chill and enter the realm of illegal discrimination.)

Is some or all of this just sour grapes because chauvinists can't have things their way anymore? Susan L. Webb is president of Pacific Resource Development Group, a Seattle-based consulting firm, and editor of "The Webb Report," a newsletter on sexual harassment. She argues that men who balk, out of fear, at mentoring, lunching with, traveling with or hiring women are simply being juvenile. They are seeing the issue in black-and-white terms: If they can't play the game the way they always have, they just won't play at all.

Ann Morrison, a co-director of the San Diego office of the Center for Creative Leadership and co-author of *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, agrees that men are overreacting when they fear false accusations of sexual ha-

rassment (after a closed-door meeting with a woman, for instance) or that their careers may be destroyed if they say or do anything that a woman happens to dislike. This is just a case of the pendulum swinging the other way, Morrison says. The current tension between men and women in the workplace is a temporary aberration, a transition phase in the evolutionary movement toward gender equality. And the fact that some men are nervous is certainly no reason to back off from the serious business of fighting sexual harassment. She insists that this is no time to be saying: "We'd better stop expecting so much of these poor men, because look, we've scared them off."

Webb takes a similar view: This, too, shall pass. She isn't particularly worried about the prospect of a lasting chill in gender relations. "Perhaps we needed some chilling in the work environment," she says. "When men are being overly personal, overly friendly, overly intimate with women . . . I'll bet the women don't have any problem with a little chilling out."

Sepler disagrees. The freeze in the workplace "is hurting women," she says, "and I believe it is hurting women for the long haul." The reasoning: As men withdraw, they take their power with them. A woman looking for a male mentor is out of luck if she is perceived as a lawsuit in search of a defendant. A woman hoping to advance her career by making contacts around the nation is similarly stymied if men feel straitjacketed in her presence, believing (or imagining) that they must speak and behave as they would in the company of Sister Therese.

When sexual-harassment "awareness" becomes obsessive, Sepler worries that "a generation of progress may be lost in the name of a good objective, which is, of course, to rid the workplace of unnecessary, counterproductive and harmful behavior."

Is sexual-harassment training part of the problem? Catalyst's Townsend thinks so. In the wake of the Clarence Thomas hearings, she says, a lot of corporations dragged out the same harassment-training programs they'd already conducted and simply ran their employees through the ringer one more time, shouting, "Naughty, naughty!" in a louder voice. This kind of reactive training often does more harm than good, Townsend says, by raising anxiety and failing to communicate meaningful information. It also fails to look at some of the larger issues. Such as . . .

## THE POWER THING

Webb, Morrison and other observers view the tension between women and men in the workplace as a natural outcome of power inequities between the genders. Their argument is that men still have most of the power

and are resisting any change as a way to protect their power base. Webb asserts that sexual harassment has far more to do with exercising power in an unhealthy way than with sexual attraction. Likewise, the glass ceiling, a metaphor for the barriers women face in climbing the corporate ladder to management and executive positions, is about power and access to power.

Perhaps the power structure, and not power itself, bears closer examination, suggests Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* and co-founder of the Center for Partnership Studies in Pacific Grove, CA. She claims that any systematic examination of power must also be a study of gender.

Eisler identifies two basic kinds of corporate power structures. The first, which she defines as the "dominator" model, is patterned after the military system, where a few people at the top issue orders while the many at the bottom obey. This model is slowly beginning to fade from view. It will be replaced, she says, by a "partnership" model that stresses cooperation and collaboration. It's no coincidence that this partnership model values skills traditionally regarded as feminine strengths while the fading dominator model values more masculine traits, and that one is replacing the other just as women are achieving more status and power in corporations across the country. In fact, *Inc. Magazine* reported that in 1992 women-owned businesses surpassed the entire *Fortune 500* in terms of numbers of people employed.

It's not that power is at the heart of the gender issue so much as that gender is at the heart of the power issue, Eisler says. Most of the traits associated with the feminine side of the human coin—passivity, collaboration, cooperation, the use of influence rather than authority—are in fact characteristics that tend to be exhibited by *any* group that is oppressed. In other words, she says, the more compliant behaviors generally attributed to women are not the result of some genetic gender predisposition, but merely socialized responses to living under a dominator power structure.

As the dominator model is replaced by the partnership model, the current chill probably will fade, albeit slowly, Eisler predicts. And as we adjust to the new structure of power, most of the problems caused by sexual harassment and glass ceilings will disappear.

Webb concurs with this part of Eisler's analysis. The movement toward worker empowerment, flattened hierarchies and teamwork will greatly benefit women in the workplace, Webb says. As decision-making power gets spread around and women find themselves less threatened by the dominator structure, then sexism and discrimination will become

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less prevalent and less damaging. In the meantime, of course, those who have the power (read white males) will struggle against the change, and some resentment of women is inevitable as power gets redistributed. But the light shines clearly at the end of the tunnel.

Others are not so hopeful. Morrison, while agreeing that women are getting into more management positions at lower levels, sees entirely too little movement into the top ranks of executive circles. If anything, she says, women's progress into upper management has plateaued. This means that if power inequities are to be further remedied, "we're still depending on white male executives to turn this around." Not a happy prospect.

### **WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE**

There is another school of thought regarding the gender cold war in the workplace. It holds that the primary cause of the big chill is not power inequities but miscommunication. This should be good news, because if the whole thing is a communication issue, then we can simply train people to get along better, right? Well, yes and no.

Communication techniques can, of course, be taught. But students of cross-gender communication insist that it is a special case. Building skills in this area, they say, involves purging some deeply ingrained preconceptions and delving into some very complicated issues. Indeed, one look at a stack of books on gender communication is enough for us to start hoping that the whole mess is only a power issue after all; let the winds of change handle it.

But the answer to miscommunication between the sexes will not be blowing in the wind. Any attempt to change attitudes will require a conscious effort and a lot of work.

Many of those in the gender-communication camp cite Tannen's book as the authority on the different communication styles of men and women. We've already noted her distinction between rapport and reporting in the use of language. If Tannen is right, the implications are enormous. For instance, her thesis implies that journalism is an inherently flawed vehicle for communicating with women. All of the "hard" news in newspapers and most articles in magazines are "reported," and any attempt to establish a personal rapport with the reader is usually condemned as unprofessional.

Among the other communication distinctions Tannen makes in her book: Men value independence over intimacy and women value connection over status. She writes, for example, about the wife who repeatedly asks her husband to fix something and is labeled a nag. What's really happening, Tannen asserts,

is that the man is trying to establish the independence of his action by putting time between the request and the compliance. In effect, he wants to fool himself into believing that he is fixing the broken doohickey of his own free will and initiative, not because the woman told him to. That time lag causes the woman to repeat the request because she believes her husband didn't hear or understand what she said.

The notion that women value intimacy over independence presents particular problems in the workplace. The idea of trying to communicate in an "intimate" way with female co-workers seems directly contrary to everything men are hearing from the human-resources department. Aaron Kipnis and Elizabeth Herron, co-directors of the Santa Barbara Institute of Gender Studies, have been holding what they call "summit meetings of the sexes" around the country. Their book *Gender War, Gender Peace* is due out this month. They assert that men automatically associate intimacy with sex; women don't. So a woman who desires intimacy with male associates at work is not necessarily looking for romance. But when she tries to establish her idea of an "intimate" relationship with a male co-worker, he may well interpret her signals as sexual interest. And he may well respond—with results ranging from mutual embarrassment to disaster.

That's one type of communication problem that crops up around the issue of intimacy. There are others. Carol Duff, president of WomenWorks in Fort Collins, CO, and author of *When Women Work Together*, offers a different example of what intimacy at work looks like and how men and women respond. She was in a restaurant with some friends when a waitress came out of the kitchen crying. The male waiters, she says, actually moved away from the woman while female co-workers rushed to her from everywhere in the restaurant to hug and comfort her.

Duff interviewed more than 500 women for her book, and most agreed they were perfectly comfortable giving and receiving hugs in the workplace. A distraught woman looking for hugs of support and understanding from male co-workers, however, is probably in for a long wait. And the wait grows longer, not shorter, if the men have attended a standard workshop on sexual harassment, with all of its grim warnings about the dangers of touching. (Duff suggests that male managers or co-workers can best communicate intimacy with an upset woman simply by listening to her honestly and sympathetically: "A hug is a physical gesture of love and support, but [listening] can be a more distanced but also very important gesture.")

Kipnis and Herron's recommended answer to the problems of intimacy and other commu-

nication issues is the gender summit meeting, a safe place where these matters can be explored. A gender summit may use any number of sensitivity types of techniques to get people to open up. For instance, the facilitator might separate men and women into different groups, telling the men's group to make a list of things that make it difficult to be a man and the women's group to do likewise. By sharing these lists, Herron says, you can evoke compassion from both sides.

Such exercises lay the groundwork to address issues of intimacy and independence, status and connection. Kipnis admits that men come into this kind of discussion at a disadvantage because they are not socialized to talk about their feelings. Nevertheless, he says, it's surprising how quickly most groups will come around and talk honestly about gender issues if they have a safe environment. A single eight-hour session often can spark significant changes in attitudes, he says.

Kipnis and Herron insist, however, that attitude change is a two-way street: Understanding between the sexes has to flow both ways. Lately, in gender-related training programs, the onus has been on men to adapt to women's communication styles, but women are just as responsible for understanding male styles, they say. Kipnis and Herron prefer the idea of "gender justice" to the prevailing concept of gender "rights." Stomping your foot and demanding your rights as a man or woman is an adolescent way to deal with conflict, says Kipnis. Gender justice requires an understanding of the other sex's perspective; it's about establishing fairness and recognizing what the other gender considers fair. It's also about understanding that it is counterproductive, in the long run, to drive the wedges deeper between the sexes.

### **GO AHEAD, CROSS MY BOUNDARY**

It would be difficult to imagine an area in which clear communication between the sexes is more important than that of resolving conflicts. Part of the puzzle can again be found in each gender's use of language. In a meeting, for example, women are more likely to keep the discussion going longer so that all sides of the issue can be examined and a consensus reached. Men want to make a decision faster; they're less concerned with hearing everyone's point of view or with building a consensus. It's easy for the two groups to get on each other's nerves.

These different communication styles not only create conflict, they also shape the way men and women *handle* conflict. "For the man," says Sepler, "very typically, verbalizing the conflict is going to be a form of resolving the conflict and getting on with the next step. For the woman, processing the conflict is go-

ing to be a way of clearing up the relationship."

For instance, Sepler says, consider a situation in which a man and woman argued about something, and the woman comes back days later to re-examine the argument. The man feels they've already resolved the conflict and wonders why she won't let it drop. The woman isn't trying to start the fight again, Sepler suggests; she's attempting to gauge the temperature of the relationship to make sure it's still on track.

Communication differences also have a lot to do with boundaries, says Kipnis. In a very primal way, a man knows how to handle another male who crosses his boundary—that is, a male who insults or offends him in some way. The reaction is immediate and often confrontational. If a male crosses a woman's boundary, however, her reaction is less-immediate and less-aggressive. Consequently, the man may not even know he's crossed the line until much later. Says Kipnis: "When Anita Hill, 10 years later, said, 'I felt uncomfortable,' that's not a male style of dealing with boundary violations."

Most gender-based communication differences, according to Kipnis, Herron and other experts, are very similar to the gaps between different cultures. As Kipnis puts it, you can go to France and play the ugly American—speaking only English, talking loudly and demanding things—but it's probably more productive to learn some French. So too, learning appropriate cross-gender communication is not an imperative, but it's probably easier in the long run.

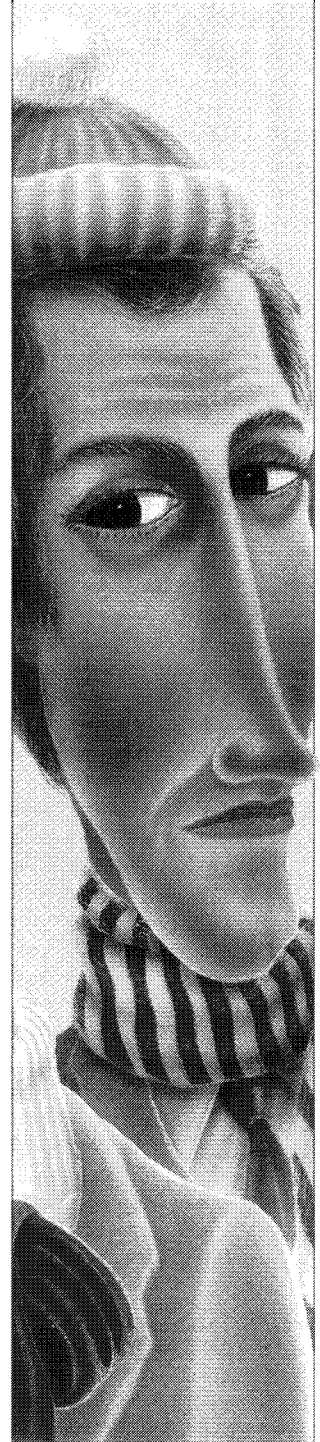
If Eisler is right and the power dynamic in corporate America is changing toward a more feminine model, being able to communicate effectively across genders may not be a mere luxury for men. Says Sepler: "I tell both women and men that if they want to be well-armed going into the year 2000, they need to be functionally bilingual in their communication, be able to speak comfortably in the women's world and in the men's world."

### **THE POLICY THICKET**

Power inequities or a communication breakdown? Many say the current friction between men and women at work is a result of both, that power and communication are twin roots of the weed of discontent. "What's the difference?" asks Duff. "I think the way we communicate has a lot to do with the power we assume and the power we're after."

But there is still another aspect of the problem to consider: the practical side of gender issues, the side that prompts meetings with the legal department. What *about* all these sexual-harassment policies and guidelines and workshops that tell people what they can and can't say or do in front of members of the

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other gender? Certainly they protect some people from being harassed, and thus they perform a valuable function. But don't these policies also build walls between men and women who *want* to communicate more effectively?

Yes, say Kipnis and Herron. In fact, they recommend that a discussion of a realistic communication policy should be part of any gender summit an organization may sponsor. Even though a group of women and men often will come up with a policy very similar to the one the legal department would create, it's important that a policy like this come from those who will be most affected by it. If a cross-gender communication policy is handed down from above, as it usually is, it's likely to cause resentment.

Catalyst's Townsend agrees. "If it comes down from the legal department, it comes across as compliance-driven—a sort of staying-one-step-ahead-of-the-law mentality rather than, 'Let's all make this a better place for everyone to work,'" she says.

But is this realistic? David Eyler doesn't think so. An Arlington, VA, training consultant, Eyler is co-author of *More Than Friends, Less Than Lovers* and a forthcoming book to be titled *Different But Equal: Managing the Mixed-Gender Workforce*. He argues that it's naive to expect any meaningful policy to emerge from an employee getaway: Policies about what people can or can't do at work will be decided in the courts and by society at large, not in sensitivity-training sessions. He also suggests that if communication differences between women and men are worked out, it will happen on a more individual basis, not in a classroom full of people.

### **GENDER TRAINING**

Presuming some form of effective communication training can help ease the tension at work, what would it look like? Townsend describes an exercise, similar to the one conducted by Kipnis and Herron, during which men and women are separated at the beginning of the session. They are asked to come up with three lists: what they wish the other sex would stop doing, what they wish the other sex would start doing, and what the other sex should keep doing.

Sepler uses another exercise that reveals how men and women are treated differently in the workplace. She describes a scenario in which an employee breaks down in tears in a performance appraisal. For one group, the hypothetical employee is a man; for the other group, it's a woman. What usually happens when the groups reconvene is that they decide to send the crying man to therapy and give the crying woman a tissue.

Judith Tingley, a Phoenix-based consultant and author of the recently published *Gender-*

*flex: Ending the Workplace War Between the Sexes*, teaches seminars in cross-gender communication. She defines her term "gender-flex" as a verb meaning "to temporarily use communication behaviors typical of the other gender in order to increase potential for influence." In other words, a male would adopt a female style to talk to a woman, and vice versa. This may not be as difficult as it sounds. In fact, some simple presentation skills may be a good substitute for a week in the woods with sensitive people talking about gender issues.

Tingley tells the story of a speech given by a man to an audience primarily consisting of women. Every example and analogy he used to illustrate his points were either from the military or from the sports world. Every quote he used was from a man. Tingley says the sense of wrongness was palpable; the audience was uncomfortable with the presentation, though no one acknowledged it out loud. Even the title of the speech, "Manager as Coach," could have been revised, she says, to appeal more to the female audience. It could have been called, for example, "The Coaching Relationship."

By the same token, says Tingley, a woman presenting to a primarily masculine audience *should* include more sports metaphors and take it easy on the relationshipspeak. Sepler agrees, claiming that since men expect women to use language to establish rapport (read, they expect women to be touchy-feely), women often must make a conscious effort to mimic a masculine style if they want to be taken seriously.

All of this might seem to point toward some massive new campaign to educate men and women about their differences. And it's certainly fair to wonder whether that really would arrest the deteriorating relationship between the sexes. As Harvard's Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes in the new afterword of her recently reprinted *Men and Women of the Corporation*: "Distancing men and women as though they were different species undercuts the move to find common ground."

Nevertheless, gender difference is something we experience daily, at work, at home, and everywhere we go. We could pretend it doesn't exist and continue to flounder in confused workplaces where signals get crossed and misunderstandings are common. Or we could fasten upon our differences, analyzing and picking at them until we get caught up in a whole new set of unproductive factions and prejudices. Or, perhaps, we could build climates of understanding, where we can adapt to the differences and get on with our work. □

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