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MEN'S STYLE AND MEN'S EXPERIENCE

Women and men, side by side

Read the following findings from our research on men and women talking. In each case, the style is described, along with its benefits and requirements. Identify some ways your team might incorporate aspects of each style into your current ways of working. Try it for a couple of weeks and then assess together how it felt.

1. Men's preference

Speaking turns follow a 'one at a time' rule, with few interruptions or overlaps. This style encourages a brisk exchange of different views. It's very useful for getting a range of ideas tabled which can be considered later. Team members need to be able to jump in quickly. But this can be developed, if everyone is willing to give some latitude and allow others to have a go.

2. Women's preference

The main characteristic is overlapping talk where several speakers share the floor at the same time. This way of collaborating helps in the joint development of a small idea into something substantial. It needs an atmosphere of trust and support, where status is down played. Team members must also be willing to see interruptions as supportive, not competitive.

Filming men-only meetings

Steve, an engineer in a Melbourne technology company, hurried into the small room occupied by the R & D team tasked with designing environmental monitoring units for airports. He called out to his fellow engineers, "Guys, we've got a problem!" At once, Rob, the team leader, made a tutting sound and breathed in sharply. Paul and Jeremy looked up from their computers, as Steve explained, "The client at Washington airport has given us a new requirement – they want the third octave attached to the events and ..." Rob cut in abruptly, leaning back in his chair and sighing deeply, "Hang on! What do we really need and where did this problem come from?"

What followed was a rapid exchange of views in a methodical problem-solving sequence, tightly orchestrated by Rob. In smooth steps, the men tackled the issue raised by their disgruntled client overseas, with Rob taking a strong lead at each stage.

UGM filmed this conversation as part of a research project about men's work style and men's experience of professional life. Interestingly, very few researchers anywhere in the English-speaking world have collected authentic data that shows both how men do things, and also the strengths and weaknesses of typical male approaches to professional talk.

What did we learn from filming men talking? What can this show us about how to build more inclusive organisations?

Closing the gender gap requires a focus on men as well as women. It makes sense that if we want to achieve significant change we need to fully understand the complex dynamics of the current status quo. A useful analogy might be medical research. When researchers want to find an effective treatment for a current problem, their first step is to discover all they can about the problem, before they figure out how to solve it.

There's an additional reason for taking a close look at male style preferences. If men and women understand how each group tends to operate and the merits of their different styles, then they not only begin to respect each other's communication preferences but even begin to try out some of the other group's ways. Why shouldn't men and women learn each other's ways of doing things, thus expanding their own skill set and enabling them to select whatever style best suits a particular task?

This is a fresh way of thinking about gender differences. It's a practical, business-focused strategy that sits alongside other strategies, such as bias reduction. If you think about it for a moment, it will make sense to you too: you're less likely to feel biased towards a social group, if you understand that group better and feel understood by them; if you can

see advantages in how they tend to do things and so feel motivated to incorporate some of their approaches into your own skill set.

To that end, in a previous briefing we talked about women's style and its benefits. Here, let's take a brief look at the strengths and weaknesses of men's style, as it emerged from our filming in 26 Australian organisations.

The essentials of men's style in men-only meetings

Peter: "In everyday talk at work, you can tell when someone's finishing their idea, and it's natural to whiz in with your five cents' worth".

Jay: "Yeah, as soon as there's a little pause, you just jump in - fast. You've just got to dive in and go for it!"

Peter and Jay made these comments after watching footage of their team meeting, where they'd dominated the talk. We pointed out the team's quick-fire exchange of speaking turns, with no interruptions or overlapping talk.

Men-only talk is rather like a team sport where the ball is tossed around a circle of players. The ball is either thrown to you specifically or you have to make some effort, if you want to catch it. Learning the subtle art of 'cutting in' can be quite daunting!

An athletic and assertive way of communicating

Repeatedly in our data, when men watched what we'd just filmed, they used terms such as cut, whiz, dive and jump to describe what it feels like to seize a valued speaking turn, against colleagues who are also your rivals in a status competition – especially if more senior people are present. Meetings are like a sport, it seems, one where you need to be quite fit, energetic, confident and assertive.

A 'secret code'

But we also came across examples of men who found it hard to get or keep a turn. They were often more reserved or had another culture in their background, where a different style was preferred. Such employees can find themselves negatively evaluated as passive or lacking initiative. One man, an immigrant to Australia, remarked that it was like a secret code. At first, he'd found it hard to figure out how the 'system' worked but when he did, everything changed for him.

Men's style is great for a rapid surfacing of multiple perspectives but it also favours the quick and the strong. The risk is that quieter people may not be heard in critical problem solving meetings. If only two or three people out of a possible six or seven contribute, it has the effect of narrowing a team's thinking. This can be a worry, especially when the problem is complex.