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NEWS RELEASE

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GENDER PLAYS BIG ROLE IN COMMUNICATION STYLES: FLEXIBILITY THE KEY TO PRODUCTIVE SHOP TALK

MISSOULA--

Women in the workplace have to find ways of sounding authoritative without violating feminine norms of communication styles, according to Sara Hayden, an assistant professor of communication studies at The University of Montana-Missoula.

Hayden made the observation at a recent UM workshop designed to explain why male/female communication styles differ and explore ways people can decrease workplace tensions arising from those differences.

"Women have to be careful not to flex their muscles in obvious ways," Hayden said. Typically, in interpersonal and group communication, she said, women focus on how others are feeling, respond to and build on others' ideas, and invite others to speak. They downplay their certainty and use verbal hedges like "maybe" and tag questions like "isn't it?" at the end of statements. Women who demonstrate too much certainty, express few doubts, avoid feelings, focus on accomplishing goals and tasks, and give little visible response to what others say, have adopted a masculine style of communication. A woman talking shop like a man violates expectations, which can arouse tensions, especially in male colleagues.

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A case in point was workshop participant Nancy DeCou, a director in Computing and Information Services at UM.

"I get in trouble with men because I'm not a typical female," she said. "In stating a position, I tend to be more direct than is accepted for a woman. That sometimes creates more problems than if I were more typical and did things as expected."

DeCou said she wishes she'd had the workshop sooner because it helped her recognize a problem with her communication style and see ways to change.

"I think it taught me to be flexible in the communications patterns I use, making sure they are appropriate to the people I'm talking to and appropriate to the situation," she said.

That is exactly what Hayden wanted participants to learn during the 2 ½-hour session. Key to keeping workplace tensions at bay, she said, is to understand why and how men and women communicate differently.

"If you start to recognize these differences, then you can address them and overcome misunderstandings and problems that arise because of the differences," Hayden said.

Gender differences in communication styles begin early in life, she explained, fostered at home, in school, in the different games boys and girls play. Boys learn to use communication to assert themselves and their ideas, to achieve something, to attract and maintain attention, to compete with others for the "talk stage" and wrest focus away from others.

Girls learn a less competitive, more collaborative style of talking because oftentimes their games -- being less structured -- require talk just to set the rules. Girls communicate to create and maintain relationships. They avoid criticizing, outdoing or putting down others.

These characteristics carry over into adulthood, Hayden said, and become the marks of male and female communication patterns. So, for example, the person in the staff meeting who feels comfortable monopolizing the discussion most likely will be a man. The person who invites others to speak and prompts them to elaborate most likely will be a woman.

But not necessarily. Men and women range all over the spectrum in communication styles, Hayden said. And, provided they recognize the different communication patterns, all can learn to adopt a different style when it's called for.

To make her point, Hayden separated the workshop participants into groups of five. Each group had a decision to make, and each member was assigned a role to play based on typical male or female communication patterns. In many cases the assigned role was quite different from the participant's natural style.

"The styles are helpful in different situations," Hayden said. "For example, if you have a decision to make quickly and a task that's on deadline, a male style of communication may work better because it's task-oriented and blunt. If you have a situation where you want a lot of creativity and a lot of people to give their input and you have a lot of time to come up with a decision, then a more typically female style of communication may be better."

In short, flexibility is the key to improving shop talk, Hayden said. And it's through recognizing and understanding gender patterns that people become flexible in overcoming differences and using different styles for different situations -- inside and outside of the workplace, she said.

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