

## Articles

### "Watch Your Language"

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#### **How to Quit Undermining Your Own Credibility and Talk Like a Grown-up**

This may be a stupid question, but did you ever notice the way some women talk?

I could be wrong, but it seems like we go out of our way to undermine our own credibility -- as if we want to beat our listener to the punch. Things like starting off statements or questions with phrases like, "This may be a stupid question," or "I could be wrong, but. . . ."

You get the picture.

After all the years of study and hard work, you'd think women lawyers would be confident enough in their own abilities to speak as if they know what they're doing. But many women -- even those who are arguably more qualified than their male counterparts -- continue to talk like girls.

Hey, it's tough to shake off a lifetime of socialization. I'm not talking conspiracy here. Our parents, teachers and friends didn't mean any harm when they spoke to little girls differently from little boys, encouraging the girls to be "good" and the boys to be "smart." That's just the way things were, and are.

#### **No Hablo Macho**

Women and men spend their entire lives essentially speaking different dialects. Women and girls speak to develop rapport, connect with others and downplay status differences. Men and boys speak to exchange facts, establish independence and assert status.

Those differences are sticky enough in personal relationships -- witness the skyrocketing sales of John Gray's "Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus" -- but when they happen in the workplace, women can be penalized in everything from career advancement to client development.

Fortunately, it's a habit that can be unlearned over time. Many women, however, give up before they realize that many of their work frustrations can be solved -- or at least lessened -- by watching what they say and how they say it.

In the last few years, a cottage industry has sprung up focusing on business communications, much of it on how men and women can bridge the chasm between their speaking styles.

One of those experts, Austin's Barbara Miller, says the differences can be boiled down to one truism: Men are better bluffers.

#### **Unlearning "Girlspeak"**

To level the playing field, Miller offers these pointers:

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- *Quit giggling:* When the conversation gets tense, some women will try to lighten the mood. Giggling, that most quintessentially female habit, not only deflates the seriousness of the room, it also withers the credibility of the giggler. So knock it off.
- *Keep your failings to yourself:* We just want to be so open and honest, Miller says, that we 'fess up to our feelings of inadequacy. Who cares if you've bitten off more than you can chew with a particular client? Be ready for some long hours and hard work to make up for your lack of expertise. But don't advertise it. "Men are equally as inadequate," she adds. "But they never talk about it."

(This point was buttressed by a male lawyer I know, who says he's seen young male lawyers negate their qualifications as well. "So much of it is you never let them see you sweat," he says. Apparently, male lawyers, if they do fall prey to this early in their careers, unlearn it quicker than women do.)

- *Lower your voice:* This means tonality, not volume. Nobody wants to pay Minnie Mouse \$250 an hour for her advice. "A lower voice carries more authority," Miller says. "Speak out of your chest instead of out of your head."

Another expert, Kansas City, Mo.'s Ruth Hermann Siress, also warns women to minimize fillers (i.e. "umm" and "you know") and avoid ending every statement with either a question or a rising intonation, which sounds like a question. Men see that as weak and looking for approval.

Among Siress' other tips:

- Focus on clarity and specificity, as opposed to vague concepts;
- Don't be afraid to interrupt occasionally. Used judiciously, it can bolster your confidence;
- Speak confidently, even if you don't feel that way.

Unlearning a lifetime of language isn't easy. If you catch yourself falling back into "girlspeak," don't be so hard on yourself. We can't reinvent ourselves in a day, can we?