

How ‘Genderflexing’ Might Help to Bridge the Gender Gap

One way to improve your reception – and odds of persuasion – when speaking to a mixed-gender audience is an idea called genderflexing. The term is the creation of Phoenix-based psychologist Judith Tingley, outlined in her 1994 book, *Genderflex: Men and Women Speaking Each Other’s Language at Work*. In a nutshell, genderflexing suggests males should adopt elements of a female style to talk to women, and vice versa. The somewhat controversial idea is based on the concept that people more readily trust, and are influenced by, those they see as more similar to themselves.

Tingley offers these ideas for how women and men might use the concept to increase their effectiveness in cross-gender presentations:

What women can do

Tingley says these suggestions are based on a still prevalent truism that many businesswomen have to work harder than men to establish perceived credibility onstage:

- **Consider having a male introduce you.** This allows the female speaker to temporarily “borrow power” from the man, Tingley says. “Have the man ‘heavy hit’ your business credentials and accomplishments, emphasizing them over references to your personal life,” she says. “The woman presenter should write the script for the introduction and threaten the man with his life if he strays from it.”

- **Quote or reference prominent male business figures.** Women should continue to periodically borrow power from men throughout their presentations, Tingley suggests. One way is to quote well-known or respected male businessmen to reinforce their points. Tingley says she recently used Tom Peters in such a way. “I made a point about the growing purchasing power of the women’s market and how it would be unwise for companies to ignore it,” she says.” Then I mentioned how Peters had been quoted saying essentially the same thing – how male executives not paying attention to the trend were missing the boat.”

- **Lighten up a bit.** “Because many women feel they’re not taken seriously, sometimes they take themselves too seriously,” Tingley says. When a woman – or man, for that matter – uses humor or self-deprecation well, it increases the perception that they’re relaxed and in command of the stage, and increases their odds of persuasion.

What men can do

Women increasingly have a lower threshold of tolerance for male speakers who overlook their presence in audiences, Tingley says. “Men are having to learn how to adapt to more women in the audience. They’re used to immediate perceived expertise and authority, but that’s starting to change – there’s more resistance, and they’re having to work harder to positively influence mixed-gender audiences.” On a purely bottom-line level – because

more women managers make buying decisions – it pays for male salespeople to take these things to heart.

As a part-time coach, Tingley sees plenty of men who don't have a clue why or how they should modify presentations accordingly. Read on, neophytes.

- **Work to present a more genuine and inclusive persona.** In a 600-person survey Tingley conducted last year comparing men's and women's perceptions of sales presentations, a consensus from both sexes was that the male salesperson's greatest strength was product knowledge. His greatest perceived weakness, however, was a lack of genuineness and honesty.

How does that translate to presentations? For starters, "Men need to come across to women as someone who 'gets it,' who is accessible, open-minded and appears to value people and relationships, not someone who is non-inclusive or driven simply by ego," Tingley says. And they need to come across in a way that doesn't appear condescending or disingenuous.

- **Use quotes, references or metaphors that feature women as well as men.** Tingley recently heard an experienced, well-known male speaker present to a mixed-gender group and use a long string of references to hard-driving, successful business leaders – all of whom were men. "I'm sure his intentions were pure as the driven snow, but it came across as though he hadn't had enough exposure to women business leaders," she says. It's not a matter of men having to use an equal number of female as male references, she says, just

that they show some awareness and sprinkle a few in. "That usually means they have to do more research about women, but so be it."

- **Include more audience participation where applicable.** If the content or situation suits it, break the audience out into small groups to allow them to discuss and explore relevant presentation points among themselves. "Get some dialog and interaction going in your audience" she says, "because that's usually better received by women than uninterrupted monologue."

What both genders can do

The title you choose for your presentation also can send subtle, gender-specific messages. Says Tingley, "If I gave a speech titled 'Male-Female Communication in the Workplace,' more women would likely attend than men. But by calling it 'Genderflex,' its just appropriately vague enough that most audiences are curious but not put off."