



Communication Styles in Engineering and Other Male- Dominated Fields Abstract



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As group projects become increasingly prevalent in engineering and other science, technology, engineering and math fields, teachers, faculty, and outreach practitioners need to understand the impact that stereotypically male communication styles favored in these environments have on women's and men's participation, socialization, and learning. This ARP information sheet and literature review describe the communication styles that tend to come into conflict when women enter highly masculine settings. It focuses on two communication styles common in these environments: self-promotion and interruptions. Practitioners must recognize that self-promotion and interruptions are expected and rewarded in engineering settings. Unfortunately, women who adopt these masculine styles tend to be perceived as unlikeable, difficult to work with, and ultimately less employable than are men engaging in the exact same communication acts.

The information sheet describes how three members of a real student team reacted to the communication that occurred on their project. The literature review synthesizes empirical research that defines differences in the communication styles associated with men and women and examines how men and women who use these communication styles are perceived by various groups. Specific examples from transcripts of students working in teams are used to illustrate the various communication styles. Both the information sheet and literature review conclude by recommending strategies to change the communication norms in engineering and strategies to help women adjust to masculine communication norms as they currently exist.

Recommended Reading

- Bowles, H. R., Babcock, L., & Lai, L. (2007). Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 103, 84–103.
- Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2010). An organizational approach to undoing gender: The unlikely case of offshore oil platforms. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 30, 3–34.
- Guzzetti, B. J., & Williams, W. O. (1996). Gender, text, and discussion: Examining intellectual safety in the science classroom. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 33(1), 5–20.
- McIlwee, J. S., & Robinson, J. G. (1992). *Women in engineering: Gender, power, and workplace culture* (SUNY Series in Science, Technology, and Society). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wolfe, J. (2010). *Team writing: A guide to working in groups*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins. See especially Chapter 7: Communication styles and team diversity.
- Wolfe, J., & Powell, E. (2009). Biases in interpersonal communication: How engineering students perceive gender typical speech acts in teamwork. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 98(1), 5–16.
- Woodfield, R. (2000). *Women, work and computing*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.