

Women are being taught to play the communication game at work

ON a sultry day in the garden of a hotel in the affluent Paris suburb of St Germain-en-Laye, 20 female executives are practicing saying “No”. Their imaginary interlocutor is “Jack”, a bullying boss who wants to spend the weekend playing golf and is trying to offload a project he has failed to complete. To make it crystal clear they reject Jack’s ill-intentions, they are using the KISS technique, a not remotely sloppy marketing tool that stands for “keep it short and simple”.

Working in pairs, they take it in turns to play Jack — a role they take to with gusto — and his female colleague. Having listened to his request, they are encouraged to look him in the eye, explain briefly why it is impossible, and tell him in so many words: “No can do, Jack.”

Communicating effectively is at the heart of this two-day women’s leadership course run by Diafora, a Paris-based consulting firm that helps companies develop an image and culture that attracts and motivates women.

The premise is that women and men communicate differently and that failing to appreciate the differences can hamper women’s progress in male-dominated workplaces.

JoAnne Freeman, one of the facilitators, runs through a list of “strong” phrases such as “The way to go”, “I’m convinced” and “immediately”, and a list of “weak” phrases such as “I guess I could”, “perhaps” and “I’m sorry”.

She argues that women are still conditioned by expectations of deference drilled into their mothers by such memorable 1950s publications as the Good Wife’s Guide, in which “a good wife always knows her place”. This conditioning can undermine the self-confidence, assertiveness and risk-taking required of prospective corporate leaders.

Women have a tendency to use weak rather than strong words. Saying: “I really don’t know much about this but I think we should...” is an impact-killer, according to Diafora. Powerful, concise messages — whether saying “no”, negotiating a deal, giving feedback or asking for a promotion — are what busy bosses understand and appreciate.

Telling people what to do and delegating work are more difficult for women, says Freeman. “They don’t want to be seen as bossy or aggressive.” But they need to learn to



Alison Maitland. Financial Times

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Speak out; the first person to speak at a meeting is the one who gets noticed.

Leadership courses for women are mushrooming as companies seek new ways to retain their female high-flyers and staunch the mid-career brain drain. Business schools are also getting in on the act. This wide-ranging course on “strengthening influence and impact” has attracted women from across Europe, working for companies such as Alcatel, Deloitte, General Electric, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Schlumberger.

One delegate, a finance director in a large industrial company, illustrates the unease that persists when women reach the top of heavily male companies. As she was being recruited to her senior management job, she was told she had the best profile, “except that, as a woman, they were concerned that I would not feel comfortable because they were all men”. This woman has already achieved power, albeit on difficult terms.

But “power” and “politics” are words that many women shy away from, says Diafora founder Avivah Wittenberg-Cox.

She is right. When a photographer from a French newspaper arrives to take a picture of the delegates, Freeman suggests a “power” pose, with fists clenched and knees bent. Several women demur. “That would come across as rather aggressive,” says one.

Three weeks later, at a very different course in London, a group of male and female managers have gathered to discuss how best the genders can work together. But here the female dislike of “politics” surfaces again.

Sue Henley, head of diversity at Merrill Lynch in Europe, explains how women at the investment bank balked at the idea of a programme aimed at honing their political skills. She found a solution. “Women didn’t want to do politics,” she says. “We changed the word ‘politics’ to ‘profile’, and that was fine.”

Words, however, are only one part of communication. On the French course, we are told that what you say accounts for only 7% of how you communicate — an oddly precise figure — and that how you look and sound is far more important. Presentation, posture and pitch of voice all count strongly. Standing with your legs crossed or speaking in a soft, high-pitched voice does not make a positive impact.

What also matters is whom you communicate with, and this is where networks come in.



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While women's networks have been in vogue for some years, women still often lack access to, or exclude themselves from, the dominant male networks.

Delegates at St Germain-en-Laye are struck by the "80/20" rule of power politics — that you should spend 80% of your time at work actually working and 20% communicating your achievements and gaining visibility internally and externally. This appears to be news to the women on the course, but may be more familiar to their male colleagues back at the office. "Guys have told me this rule as if they were fed it with their mother's milk," says Wittenberg-Cox.

She teaches what she calls "bilingual leadership" — the ability of men and women to speak and understand each other's ways of thinking and communicating.

The course is provocative and challenging, pushing delegates to try things such as a spot of public speaking, which does not always come easily, especially in a foreign language.

The techniques it teaches are useful, though they could apply as much to non aggressive men as to deferential women.

But should women still have to learn to play men at their own game in order to succeed? The presumption is that women can become themselves again, can start feminizing their organization, once they have broken through to the top. By then it may well be too late, for they are likely to have changed irrevocably.

If companies value women for bringing a different perspective, they do not want male clones. That means women being true to themselves and companies learning to accommodate alternative styles all the way up the hierarchy, not obliging women to make their male colleagues feel comfortable with them.

The London workshop is about this very subject: appreciating differences. Organized by International Women of Excellence, a European nonprofit body that aims to help professional women achieve their potential, it is attended by equal numbers of male and female managers.

"Unless we take the men with us, nothing's going to change," says Peta Payne, MD. The atmosphere is more low-key and diplomatic than on the women's course. Many of



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the delegates say they have difficulty isolating ways in which men and women communicate differently. In mixed company, it may feel more risky to stray into this territory, underlining the usefulness of women-only programmes.

Then one of the more extrovert women recalls what she learnt from a bruising encounter with a senior male banker who told her at a job interview early in her career that he believed women should stay at home.

“I told him: ‘That’s fine for you, you’ve got a six-figure salary and a wife at home. That doesn’t apply to me. I’m a single mother with two young children. I’ve got to work and I want the job’.”

Convinced she had burnt her boats, she told the employment agency that she had found the banker rude and pompous. To her amazement, the agency told her: “That’s not what he thought of you.” In fact, he so liked her determination and outspokenness that he created a better job for her, at a higher salary.

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