You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation

by Deborah Tannen

First Harper Paperback Edition - 2007
ISBN: 978-0-06-095962-3

Summary by Douglas W. Green, EdD

DrDougGreen.Com
DGreen@STNY.RR.Com

Who is Deborah Tannen?

- Deborah Tannen is an internationally recognized scholar and professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. In this book she uses scientific insight and humor to show why women and men can walk away from the same conversation with completely different impressions of what was said. This book will allow people of both genders to better understand each other and to communicate more effectively. The examples of real conversations are informative and very entertaining. This book is a classic in the field of interpersonal relations. It should be on the shelf wherever men and women work and live together.

The Main Idea

- There are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify and understand them. Otherwise we are doomed to blame others or ourselves for the damaging effects. If we recognize and understand the differences, we can take them into account, adjust to, and learn from each other's styles. This will allow us to confront real conflicts of interest.

The Importance of Metamessages

- A metamessage is what is actually communicated as opposed to what is said. It is comprised of the actual words along with body language, tone of voice, and implied meanings attributed to the actual words. A message offering help, for example, may send the message that "I am more capable than you." Metamessages also serve to ***frame*** a conversation. If you talk to someone as if you are a teacher and they are a student, they may perceive your way of talking as condescending or pedantic. If you talk like a student, you may be seen as insecure, incompetent, or naïve. Protective gestures from men are traditional, while many men resist protective gestures from women.

You hear what you want to hear.

- Much - even most - meaning in conversation does not reside in the words spoken at all, but is filled in by the person listening. One key inferred attribute deals with status. People will determine if someone speaking to them is speaking from a position of higher status, equality, or lower status. The actual status may have nothing to do with the perception. (Doug: As a principal you can speak so as to make a parent, teacher, or student feel equal or subordinate. It is a choice you can make.) Men are more likely to jockey for status in a conversation.

Intimacy and Independence

- We all need both. Women tend to focus on intimacy while men focus on independence. Interviews with teachers show that women teach to connect with and influence students. Male teachers tend to join the profession for the freedom it offers. As a result, communication between genders can be thought of as cross-cultural. Even siblings brought up in the same house experience different worlds of words. Adults talk to boys and girls differently. Boys play in large groups where competition is featured. Girls play in small groups with a focus on communication.

Mr Fixit

- When women complain to other women about an emotional problem, they are likely to get sympathy. When they complain to men, they are more likely to get suggestions for a solution to the problem. The metamessage the women is sending is a bid for understanding. By giving advice men are seen as superior. This leads to frustration on both sides. Other asymmetries arise when it comes to giving and receiving advice. Men prefer to give rather than receive. If women give advice to men they may add “there might be a better way.” Knowing something or being able to fix something is more fundamental to our notion of masculinity. Women are more likely to be givers of praise than information.

Public Talk/Private Talk
Onstage vs. Backstage

- Studies show that in public or business settings that men talk more. The opposite is true at home. For many men, the comfort of home means freedom from having to prove themselves through verbal display. Men tend to be more comfortable in using talk to claim attention. Home is where women feel free to talk. The seeds of these tendencies are sown in the ways that women and men learn to use language while growing up. When women talk in public their arguments often carry less weight as they are more likely to generalize from their own experience.

Gossip

- Many women regard exchanging details about the personal lives as a basic ingredient of intimacy. Such ***gossip*** is an essential part of friendship for most women. Men do not generally share this view. Men are more likely to talk about the details of politics, news, and sports.Telling people your secrets is evidence of friendship, but can make you personally vulnerable. Men usually do not want to take this type of risk. When men do talk about personal situations, the details are often minimal and vague. Gossip gets a bad name as it often focuses on the weaknesses, character flaws, and failures of third persons, so that the participants can feel superior.

Who Lectures, Who Listens?

- Men value the position of center stage and the feeling of knowing more. They seek opportunities to gather and disseminate factual information. Women are more interested in personal information and are frustrated when a conversation turns into a lecture. Even when women know more, less knowledgable men may dominate. Women may lack experience defending themselves and may misinterpret challenges as personal attacks. They may be inclined not to share what they know. When women listen, they are more likely to give more audible and physical responses than men. Feedback and support from a woman may make it seem like she talks too much.

Different Conflict Styles

- For most women, conflict is a threat to connection, to be avoided at all costs. Many man find conflict is a necessary way to establish status. Friendship among men often has an element of friendly aggression. The appearance of community among women may mask power struggles. Women do want to get their way, but not at the cost of conflict. Gossip too can be competitive. Girls will say "Let's do something" while boys say "do this." For men, power comes from individual action. For women, the community is the source of power. Women's inclination to seek agreement may make them better managers as they are more inclined to consult others. Tannen suggests that both genders could benefit from flexibility and understanding the other's style.

Who is Interrupting Who?

- Tannen finds this topic rather complex. Research shows that men interrupt women more often. At its worst, it is a kind of conversational bullying that sends metamessages that the partner doesn't care or isn't interested. At its best, it can show support and participation. More interruption is observed among women who engage in cooperative overlapping talk. This has led to the "clucking hen" stereotype. When men interrupt women, they are more likely overlap in an uncooperative manner that can usurp or switch the topic. Cultural differences also make this a tricky topic to study. A polite Californian might be seen as rude if she moved to Vermont.

Life is not fair!

- When men and women get together in groups, they are likely to talk in ways more familiar and comfortable to the men. This is distressing in a society where equality is a goal, and where more women are entering high-status positions. If women speak in ways expected of women, they are seen as inadequate leaders. If they speak like men, they are seen as inadequate women. Since women hesitate to be one-up, they may find themselves framed as one-down. When men talk like women they are often not seen negatively. Women tend to apologize more, which leads to a one-down frame. Men's style is generally evaluated more positively and is taken as the norm.

Different Species

- Studies of video tapes of conversations between pairs of boys and pairs of girls show that regardless of age, women sit closer to each other and look at each other more directly. While women are indirect about their speech, men are indirect when it comes to physical alignment and verbally expressing personal problems. Women often talk with rising intonation at the end of each phrase, which makes everything sound like a question. The purpose my be to encourage the listener to participate by saying something like "uh huh." Boys endure far more correction in school as they are more active. Their play is often parallel rather than coordinated. Adult gender patterns show up in Tannen's studies of three-year olds and second graders.

You don't need to change, you just need to understand the difference.

- Understanding and accepting the differences between men's and women's styles can improve relationships and make it easier to resolve disagreements. It can be helpful for women to be more assertive and men to be more sensitive, but changing your style is like changing who you are. Women can learn how to accept some conflict and difference without seeing it as a threat to intimacy. Many men can learn to accept interdependence without seeing it as a treat to their freedom.

- Finally, keep in mind that theire are exceptions to all of the generalizations presented.