

Gender Differences in Communicative Abstraction and their Organizational Implications

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Abstract

Our research shows that men and women differ in their use of communicative abstraction, with men using more abstract communication than women. Because people rely on communicative abstraction as a heuristic cue for power and status, women's tendency to use less abstract communication may interfere with their ability to emerge as leaders. We provide recommendations for how managers can support women's growth and leadership emergence in light of our findings. We further highlight strategies that men and women can adopt to tailor their communication to the demands of the context.

Staying at home is essential. It's a simple but highly effective way to constrain the virus - it denies it places to go, and will help give our healthcare system a fighting chance. So over the next 48 hours every workplace must implement alternative ways of working, people must work from home so that interactions with others are limited. Essential services will need to put in place alternative ways of working that ensure physical distancing of staff of 2 meters, or utilise appropriate Personal

Protective Equipment. Schools will be closed from tomorrow, except to the children of essential workers such as our doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers and police - this will give them time to plan. This will be temporary, and schools will close entirely from midnight Wednesday. The school term break will be brought forward. For the remainder of this week and through the term break schools will establish ways to deliver teaching online and remotely.

--Excerpt from Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern address to the nation, New Zealand, March 23, 2020

Most of all, I want to thank the American people for rising to the challenge and showing incredible courage, determination, patience, grace and grit. From New York to Seattle and everywhere in between, your acts of selflessness, and sacrifice and ingenuity are a powerful testament to the American character. It's really being shown. It's really showing up at a level that people are really respecting. All over the world, they're respecting, and the world has problems. We're 148 countries now. 148 countries are affected by the invisible scourge, and all of the uplifting reflections of the American spirit are out there for everyone to see. Together, we will care for our fellow citizens and we will win this war, and we'll win it much sooner than people think and we'll be back in business as a country pretty soon. You'll be hearing about that also pretty soon.

--Excerpt from President Donald Trump's address to the nation, United States, March 23, 2020

Leaders differ in how they frame messages. Consequently, these messages can significantly impact follower motivation, satisfaction, and compliance. During the coronavirus crisis, leaders differed widely in how they communicated, with some leaders being more successful than others in impacting their constituents' behavior. In our opening example, the message framed by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was concrete and specific, instructing New Zealanders on how they might adapt their behavior to keep themselves and others safe. In contrast, the message by US President Trump was more abstract, emphasizing the larger values and broader purpose of Americans' behavior during the pandemic. Much research has touted the successful communication of female leaders during the coronavirus crisis in guiding action and promoting compliance. For instance, recent research shows that states led by female governors in the United States saw fewer coronavirus-related hospitalizations and fewer deaths than states led by male governors.¹ Similarly, cross country comparison data demonstrates that even

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after controlling for socio-economic disparities, female leadership resulted in overall lower levels of coronavirus transmissions and deaths.^{2,3}

Other research also finds support for a female leadership advantage, with women leaders being more transformative and participative than male leaders as well as demonstrating greater individualized consideration and showing lower levels of laissez faire leadership than male leaders.^{4,5,6} Furthermore, women leaders make more ethical choices than their male counterparts.^{7,8} Yet, we continue to see that women are overall less likely to emerge as leaders.⁹ One of the reasons that women are less likely to emerge as leaders is that people's implicit leadership prototypes are more masculine than feminine.^{10,11} Male speech styles and behavioral preferences have become implicitly identified as more characteristic of leaders than feminine styles of being, presenting a challenge for the emergence of female leaders who may be less likely to meet these masculine leadership prototypes.

One such trait that favors men more than women and is associated with leadership is communicative abstraction.^{12,13} Communication can vary in terms of whether it is more concrete or abstract. Concrete messages emphasize the details, discuss specific examples, and communicate the "how" of actions and plans. Abstract messages, in contrast, emphasize the big picture, describe things in a general manner, and communicate the "why" or larger purpose of action. While concrete communication is oriented toward addressing specific actions, abstract communication is focused on the broader vision. Findings suggest that abstract language acts as a power cue, suggesting that a speaker is more powerful, and that people are more likely to confer power and status on abstract communicators.^{14,15,16} In an experimental study, for example, people who communicated abstractly were seen as more powerful and leader-like.¹⁶ Likewise, in a study of online programmers, those who framed their advice abstractly were given more reputation points.¹⁵

In recent research we further find that men and women differ in the extent to which they frame messages abstractly, with women being more likely to use a concrete communication style and men being more likely to use an abstract communication style.¹² We see persistent gender differences in the use of communicative abstraction across many different contexts. For example, in a study of text spoken on the floor of the U.S. Congress from 2001-2017, male members of Congress used more abstract communication than female members of Congress. In an analysis of approximately 600,000 blog posts, male bloggers framed their communication more abstractly than female bloggers. We found a similar effect in more controlled studies, where participants were instructed about what to communicate, or simply choose between abstract and concrete statements to use in their communication.

Men used more adjectives and end-related descriptions of their actions in their speech, whereas women used more concrete verbs and descriptions of the means by which actions are done. In total, gender differences in communication were observed among leaders and entrepreneurs, across different age groups (although not in adolescents), in both experimental and naturally produced speech, and in written as well as spoken language.

Given the aforementioned link between abstract communication and status conferral, women's tendency to speak concretely may be an important barrier to their attainment of organizational rewards. In recent research, we considered how these dynamics may affect women seeking venture funding.¹³ We found that female founders framed their ventures more concretely than male founders, and that this lower level of abstraction was associated with a lower likelihood of receiving funding from venture capitalists. Other research teams' findings have also been consistent with concrete communication being a barrier to women's resource attainment. For example, researchers examining male applicant advantage in a blinded grant review process at the Gates Foundation found that the gender difference was explained by the tendency of male applicants to use broad language and female applicants to use narrow language. Importantly, variation in linguistic styles predicted reviewer scores, but not later innovative performance after an accepted proposal, suggesting that the linguistic signal was harming qualified women.¹⁷

Even though people confer status (and resources) on communicators who speak abstractly, there is no clear relationship between a communication's abstractness and its effectiveness. For instance, long term visions that are communicated using concrete images are more impactful than visions that are solely abstract in both content and style.¹⁸ Investors respond more positively to top management communication that is framed concretely rather than abstractly.¹⁹ Furthermore, followers are more motivated to engage in complex tasks when they are broken down into concrete goals and steps.²⁰ The experience of psychological distance from a leader also influences the effectiveness of concrete or abstract speech. Employees are motivated by psychologically close leaders or immediate supervisors when they frame messages concretely and psychologically distant leaders when they frame messages abstractly.²¹ In order to be effective communicators, leaders must therefore strategically alter communication based on their goals and demands of the context. Thus, whereas people who communicate abstractly may be selected as leaders, the tendency to speak abstractly does not have a simple direct effect on leadership effectiveness, suggesting that the association between abstraction and leadership emergence may be

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holding back concrete-speaking women who could perform well in leadership roles.

Based on our research, we provide the following recommendations for future leaders and managers who are motivated to communicate effectively and support the emergence of women leaders.

As a hiring manager, do not rely on communicative abstraction as a heuristic to judge leadership potential

People believe that leaders speak more abstractly than non-leaders and hence those who speak abstractly are more likely to be perceived as having leadership potential, even though speaking abstractly does not lead to effective communication across all contexts. This tendency to use communicative abstraction as a cue for status and power unduly affects women's abilities to emerge as leaders due to gender differences in the use of communicative abstraction. The use of communicative abstraction as a cue for status is an example of a male bias in leadership such that attributes associated with masculinity and dominance get associated with leadership even though they are not predictive of leadership effectiveness. It is important for hiring managers to be conscious of this bias and work to counter it.

Remember that gender differences in communicative abstraction are context dependent and do not mean that women cannot think abstractly

In our work on gender and communication, we found that the relationship between gender and communicative abstraction likely varies based on context. Specifically, when we made salient an audience's distance (communicating with someone in a far-away city located in a different state) or its large size (communicating with many others), men and women were similarly likely to use abstract communication to be relevant and relatable to psychologically distant audiences. In other words, women will use abstract communication when they think it is warranted, even if they typically are more concrete speakers than men. This suggests that these gender differences reflect a communication preference rather than any underlying cognitive ability.

As a hiring manager, ask broad as well as pointed questions.

If being able to communicate abstractly is an important determinant of success in a particular role, hiring managers can tailor questions strategically to obtain a more abstract response. If women are specifically asked questions about their broader goals and purpose, this will prompt them to convey

abstract and big picture thinking. Similarly, because the ability to communicate concretely is crucial in everyday managerial interactions, asking direct and specific questions will allow you to assess a candidate's ability to be flexible and adapt their speech style to the context.

In leadership emergence contexts, sell yourself by presenting your ideas abstractly

Speaking abstractly is beneficial in leadership emergence contexts. In many leadership emergence contexts – from hiring managers selecting future leaders through interviews to citizens casting ballots for their government representatives – people often make heuristic judgments about abilities based on limited information. In these contexts, because speech abstraction serves as a heuristic cue for status and power, women would benefit from speaking abstractly. Because women have to work particularly harder to come across as being a leader, using abstract speech serves as an implicit means by which women can communicate power and status without being penalized for being dominant and non-feminine. If you find communicating abstractly to be difficult because it goes against your natural way of speaking, consider adding a section at the front end of a speech or email that captures the big-picture and presents the broader perspective so that it is clear to your message recipients that you are capable of this type of communication.

As a leader who motivates and influences others, adapt your speech to the context

Once an individual successfully emerges as a leader, flexibility in speech is key. In order to be effective as a leader, it is important to tailor speech to the context, using concrete and abstract speech strategically to meet your communication goals. Leadership communication that is framed concretely can be particularly useful for supporting action and for motivating those who are close to you. On the other hand, abstract communication is most effective when leaders are communicating with those who are far away, with many others rather than one person, and are addressing those who are psychologically distant from them. Thus, both men and women would benefit from adapting their speech to meet the demands of their context, being strategic about how they tailor their message and communicate their goals.

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Gil Appel is an assistant professor of marketing at the GW School of Business. Professor Appel's research has focused on the rapidly growing digital domain, within which he is interested in two main arcs: The first arc is the evolution of digital markets, from e-commerce to social networks to mobile domains. Using quantitative models, he examines new products' development and growth, and how such markets differ from traditional ones. His second research arc uses digital markets to examine individual behavior. Specifically, using individual-level data to examine the process wherein individual-level behavior manifests as segment and market dynamics. Dr. Appel work addresses important behavioral questions that relate to disparity, social processes, social norms, consumers' choice heuristics and biases in the markets.

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Endnotes

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