"Come on, we don't have all day … what's your point?"

July 2020, Megan Philbin

Women's perceived reluctance to get straight to the point may disadvantage them more when communicating in the remote environment.

It is important for a speaker to get right to the point to avoid losing their audience's attention, particularly where the audience is remote. This is something with which many women tend to

struggle.

> In their book "*Hardball for Women: Winning at the Game of Business*" Pat Heim and
> Tammy Hughes write, "Women often feel uncomfortable delivering the punchline until the
> interpersonal side is in place. They're afraid the listener will misunderstand them if the
> relationship is out of sync."

Many men may feel they have experienced this, but have they ever wondered why it happens?
The answer lies in the differences between the sexes and how they communicate when growing
up. Many children tend to play with other children of the same sex. In her article "*The Power of
Talk,*" Deborah Tannen points out "girls tend to learn conversational rituals that focus on the
rapport dimension of relationships whereas boys tend to learn rituals that focus on the status
dimension."

She explains how girls learn at a young age that coming across as better than others is a surefire
way to be cut out of the clique. The environment teaches them to not sound too sure of
themselves and to avoid telling others what to do. In Tannen's words, "girls learn to talk in ways
that balance their own needs with those of others—to save face for one another in the broadest
sense of the term."

Unlike girls, Tannen acknowledges, "boys learn to use language to negotiate their status in the
group by displaying their abilities and knowledge, and by challenging others and resisting
challenges."

These early learned behaviors manifest themselves in several ways in professional adults. Women
feel an innate obligation to insert small talk on the phone, in person, and/or over email as a preface
to any sort of business-related information. This combination of instinct and conditioning helps
them bring warmth and comfort to their communication, and perhaps gives an edge when building
and cultivating relationships. Women often offer as much information as they have at hand
(checking back in notes, reciting from memory, adding another paragraph to an email) in order to
be as helpful as possible to their audience; once everyone has the same information, the playing
field is level.

It is tendencies such as these which, even more acutely in the remote environment, can cause
women to unintentionally lose their audience.

How can a female speaker adapt to a virtual audience's needs while remaining authentic?
Where is the line between being helpful and over thorough?

Here are Templar's suggestions for simple steps to ensure virtual messages do not get lost:

1. **Message structure** – Can you flip the order of the paragraphs or sentences, starting with the most impactful messages and hooking the audience from the beginning?

While we women may not excel at 'headline first', chances are the headline is already there in the email or in your head and you just need to find it and pull it forward - to alter the structure of the message. Is the last sentence of the email typically the one which gives your suggestion or answers the question? If so, take a second to re-read your emails before you hit send.

2. **Preparation** – Knowing ahead of time how long it takes to cover your material will help make for a more effective, shorter and more convincing contribution. How can you feel more confident in those answers or succinct points you are making on the video or voice call? Can you streamline your points to just 2-3 key messages (as that is all anyone will remember anyway)? Once you've done this, rehearse, running through the points. Time it: better yet, record the audio using a cellphone voice recorder. One useful tip is to consider what you'd say if you had only 5 seconds

to say it: this forces you to focus on the most salient points and relegate the background.

3. **Convey warmth** - Take a second to smile before you begin to speak. Look directly into the camera on your computer, which will ensure you are making eye contact with your audience. Virtual platforms – regardless of their ability to offer functionality such as chats, reactions, and polling – cannot replace the connection which comes from sitting next to or across from someone in person. Speakers need to be even more mindful of body language subtleties to prevent the erosion of trust across a screen. It is tempting to speak to the faces in front of you or at the slides/materials from which you are delivering, but this should be avoided as much as possible. If you have notes, consider having them upright next to your screen instead of on the table in front of you which will draw your eyes down. Strategic placement of a second screen or external camera can also help avoid these traps.

4. **Use an anecdote** – Bring your message to life via a story which demonstrates the point you are trying to make. Numbers and statistics – even when in a graph or chart on a slide – can be dull when being discussed in a room full of people, they are even worse when it is virtual.   Storytelling is more personal, eliciting emotional responses from the audience, and makes it more likely they will not only pay attention, but remember it later down the road.

5. **Check in** – When presenting information or answering a question, make sure to answer up front and try to say less. Pause and say something to the effect of "Let me just pause there. Susan, does that answer your question?" Or, "Before I continue, is that about the right amount of detail for you, Robert? I can certainly go into further depth if you wish." Put yourself in the audience's shoes. If you were a listener, would you have started checking out the bookshelf behind the speaker in her living room, or clicking into your inbox to reply to emails by now?

Let the audience tell you whether or not they are satisfied with the answer or the logic. Twenty to thirty seconds is a good rule of thumb in a virtual environment; after that listeners need a break.

Reading list:

"*Hardball for Women: Winning at the Game of Business*" Pat Heim and Tammy Hughes

"*The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why*" Deborah Tannen, HBR September – October 1995

"*Boys and Girls – Superheroes in the Doll Corner*" Vivian Paley