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# Interrupt the Gender Bias of Speaking

Posted on February 12, 2015 by Jayne Reardon

Stereotypically speaking, women talk a lot. Statistically speaking, men talk more – at least within professional settings. Men tend to speak more frequently, loudly and dominantly than their female colleagues, which has effectively silenced many women in the workplace.

## The Hazards of Speaking While Female

Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and Wharton business professor Adam Grant in a recent New York Times op ed [Speaking While Female](#) highlight the reasons that women tend to stay quiet at work. They walk a "tightrope" when they do speak at work because they are "[e]ither . . . barely heard or . . . judged as too aggressive." However, Sandberg and Grant also note that, "When a man says virtually the same thing, heads nod in appreciation for his fine idea."

The tendency for men to take credit for an idea put forth by a woman has been termed "bropropriating" and the unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man has been termed "manterruptions" by columnist Jessica Bennett in [10 ways women can avoid 'manterruptions' in meetings](#). Although Bennett's terminology may sound colloquial, the concepts she describes are well-recognized among social scientists.

In their article, Sandberg and Grant cite research from Yale and the University of Texas in support of their view that women often decide to stay quiet for fear of backlash.

The Yale study focused on two professional groups: senators and chief executives. It showed that powerful male senators (in terms of tenure, leadership roles and legislation passed) spoke significantly more on the Senate floor than their junior colleagues; however no similar link between power and speaking time existed for powerful female senators. Among chief executives, male executives who spoke more than their peers received 10 percent higher competency ratings from colleagues; however, female executives who spoke more than their peers were rated (by both genders) as 14 percent less competent.

The University of Texas experiment required mixed-gender teams to make strategic business decisions at a bookstore. The researcher randomly informed one member that the inventory system was flawed and gave that



person data about a better approach. When women in the experiment challenged aspects of the original business model, they were viewed as less loyal. Even when team leaders were informed that one member possessed unique information that would benefit the group, the women's ideas were rejected.

The results of these studies reinforce three important observations within the workplace: 1) women speak less than men, regardless of their position of power; 2) women who voice their opinion more frequently than other coworkers risk facing backlash; and, 3) women's suggestions are more likely to be discounted.

## Women Speak Less in School

The gender disparity in speaking up starts long before folks hit the workplace. In a Harvard study, [Women and Men in the Classroom: Inequality and Its Remedies](#), Catherine G. Krupnick researched gender's influence on participation within various classroom settings at Harvard College. Across the settings, male students spoke more often than female students.

But the gender of the teacher mattered. Male students spoke two and a half times longer than their female peers in a classroom where the instructor was male and the majority of students were male. But where the instructor was female, female students spoke three times longer than they did when they were in male-instructor classes.

In addition, Krupnick's article cites data about the discussion patterns of the genders. Groups composed entirely of women students tended to have a "rotating" participatory style in which women took turns in an egalitarian way, contributing more or less equal amounts during the class period. In contrast, male discussion groups appear more contest-like, with very uneven amounts of talk per man determined by telling personal stories or raising their voices to establish hierarchies of access to the discussion.

I can relate. I went to a small, all girl high school, then a college that recently had gone co-ed where women were grudgingly tolerated by many men, to a law school that was about 75% male with predominantly male professors to a profession similarly constituted.

In which setting did I feel most comfortable speaking out? High school. There the social norms were everyone took turns and spoke about equally. I don't recall any verbal contests in the classroom.

Over the years, I and my closest female friends have shared perplexed wonderment about the tendency of some of our male counterparts to dominate conversations and to self-promote about what we viewed as rather mundane accomplishments. Maybe they are just wired differently.

But being aware of the general tendencies of men to dominate mixed discussion groups is not enough. As Sandberg and Grant noted, "Obviously, businesses need to find ways to interrupt this gender bias." This includes law firms.

Here some suggestions for bosses, co-workers, women and men to interrupt the gender bias of speaking in the legal workplace.

### **1. Establish practices directed to the tendency for women to under-participate.**

Bennett suggested three tools in her article to make it easier for women to be heard: 1) practice bystander intervention; 2) create a buddy system with a friend; and 3) support your female colleagues. If you're a bystander in a meeting and a man interrupter strikes, say something like, "Wait, I want to hear what Jill is saying" or do something nudge or elbow him. Creating a buddy system is a bit sneaky, but it works: ask a male friend to nod and look interested when you speak in a meeting and to publicly back you up. These are simple steps that you can personally take to help identify the interrupters and the interrupted, and proactively support and encourage those who need it. Individual acts can ultimately make a big difference.

### **2. Assign the group leader with gender in mind.**

Just as women students speak up more in classes taught by females, female lawyers may be galvanized to speak up more when meetings are run by women. This may take some intentional actions because the people in positions of authority within the legal field are disproportionately male. As Sandberg and Grant's article highlights, "The long-term solution to the double bind of speaking while female is to increase the number of women in leadership roles."

### **3. Implement guidelines to reduce the likelihood of inequalities developing.**

Sandberg and Grant discuss various guidelines that have already been implemented by businesses, including: blind auditions within the entertainment industry; anonymous submissions of suggestions and solutions within companies; and, a no-interruption rule while anyone – male or female – is talking at meetings. Creating an environment where everyone can be heard means more innovative ideas, more effectiveness, and more worker satisfaction.

### **4. Listen to all workers with equal seriousness, challenging, correcting or praising when appropriate.**

A good idea is good based on its merits, not because a male or a female came up with it. The same is true for bad ideas. Therefore, by accepting or rejecting ideas based on their merits instead of their creator, the







solutions are more likely to be sound. Additionally, by challenging, correcting, or parsing when appropriate, you can avoid gaining a reputation of favoritism or, even worse, of sexism.


## 5. Women: Practice Assertive Body Language and Voice

Assume a position of power. Take the seat at the table you might instinctively reserve for someone more important. Gesture largely. Power poses make one appear more authoritative, increase your testosterone levels—and your confidence. Cheryl Sandberg has gotten grief for telling women to “lean in” but Bennett’s article cites research that shows men physically lean in more often than women in professional meetings, making them less likely to be interrupted. Don’t undermine your contribution by starting with an apology or something like, “I don’t know if others agree....” And don’t end statements with a questioning inflection. All of this may go against the female tendencies to consensus build through speech—but it is not listened to in the workplace.

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**Jayne Reardon**  
Executive Director at [Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism](#)

As a prior trial lawyer, Jayne leads lawyers to embrace the transformative possibilities of future law practice. As a prior disciplinary counsel, Jayne is passionate about promoting the core values of the legal profession. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School and the University of Notre Dame. Jayne lives in Park Ridge, Illinois with her husband and those of her four children who are not otherwise living in college towns and beyond.

CATEGORIES: [2Civility Blog](#), [Leadership](#)

## 4 thoughts on “Interrupt the Gender Bias of Speaking”

1. **Tessa** says:

February 12, 2015 at 9:45 pm

Are you recommending women just act more like men? I think this is the wrong message. We need to be teaching authenticity rather than conformity. Nothing is going to change if women are taught to act a certain way. Clearly the “power pose” you are referring to is stereotypically one that is masculine.

[Reply](#)

2.  **Jayne Reardon** says:

February 23, 2015 at 1:44 pm

Thank you for your comment, Tessa. I agree with you that women (and men) need to act in an authentic way. I am certainly not advocating that women “just act more like men.” I do think it is helpful to understand how

the genders tend to communicate as a tool/skill for workplace success. For women (as well as men) the physiological benefits of “the power pose” may be another tool to be used in appropriate circumstances.

[Reply](#)

3. Pingback: [Can Men Be Feminists? | XY Feminist](#)

4. Pingback: [Can Men Be Feminists? | Feminism In Space](#)

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 **Jayne Reardon**  
@2Civility

We will sorely miss Michelle and wish her the best on her new chapter!

♡ [→]

45m

 **Stephanie Villinski**  
@2CivilitySV

HA!  
Here's hoping Chicago gets in the Butler mix. 🙏

♡ [→]

2h

 **Michelle Silverthorn**  
@2CivilityMS

Well that was just wonderful. I'm so happy the @LaverCup has found its way to Chicago. Thanks for coming guys and we'll see you this weekend! #LaverCup





♡ [→]

2h



**Michelle Silverthorn**

@2CivilityMS



Replying to @2CivilitySV

And you'd be a lucky person if you did!

♡ [→]

2h



**Stephanie Villinski**

@2CivilitySV



Check out this opening! You could work with me!

♡ [→]

2h



**Jayne Reardon**

@2Civility



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Two Prudential Plaza Suite 1950  
180 N. Stetson Avenue Chicago, IL 60601  
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