



SCIENCE ONLINE | SCIENCE MAGAZINE | SCIENCE NOW | [NEXT WAVE HOME](#) | [STKE/AIDS/SAGE](#) | [SCIENCE CAREERS](#) | [E-MARKETPLACE](#)

**DAVID G JENSEN** | [Change Password](#) | [Change User Info](#) | [Access Rights](#) | [Subscription HELP](#) | [Sign Out](#)

**Science**

[ABOUT Us](#) | [SUBSCRIPTIONS](#) | [FEEDBACK](#) | AAAS

[SEARCH](#)

[▶ SITEMAP](#)

[▶ E-MAIL UPDATES](#)

[DIRECTORIES](#)

next wave

[Job Market News](#)

[Career Transitions](#)

[Job Hunting](#)

[Diversity & Work-Life](#)

[Postdoc & Faculty Issues](#)

[For Grad Students](#)

[Science Policy](#)

**FREE ACCESS:**

[ACADEMIC CAREER ADVICE](#)

[POSTDOC NETWORK](#)

[GRANTSNET](#)

[JOBSNET](#)

[SALARY SURVEY](#)

[FORUMS](#)



## Communication With Conviction

21 NOVEMBER 2003

DAVID G. JENSEN, A WRITER AND SPEAKER ON CAREER ISSUES WORLDWIDE, IS THE FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CAREERTRAX INC., A BIOTECHNOLOGY AND PHARMACEUTICAL CONSULTING FIRM LOCATED IN SEDONA, ARIZONA.

[PREVIOUS COLUMNS](#)  
[RELATED ARTICLES](#)

I recently attended a regional meeting of the Association for Women In Science (AWIS) and had an enjoyable day speaking with a mix of industry scientists, professors, grad students, and postdocs. One of the questions after my presentation, however, caught me by surprise, even though I had prepared well for this workshop. "Do women have any unique communication issues that can affect their career progress?"

In my answer, I focused on the

Today's

workplace is entirely different from that of our parents. It poses a cross-cultural and cross-gender communication challenge, but there is much more potential for productivity.

job interview environment, where one can often find many communication-style differences between men and women.

Although this seemed to satisfy the audience member--a job seeker--the discussion afterward indicated that there is a lot more to this subject. The next day, my wife told me about a new book, *The Girls' Guide to Power and Success*, by Susan Wilson Solovic. It struck me as a great idea for a column. However, when I proposed this concept to my editor at Next Wave, he replied that the a man writing a column about women is "full of landmines."

I have charged into the fray.  
Please, dear reader, be gentle.

### **Practical Communication Tips for Women From Women**

Susan Wilson Solovic, who must have named *Girls' Guide* with a fair amount of irony, points out that while women are noted for generally excellent skills, especially in listening and in articulating feelings, they suffer from common communication gaffs. I've adapted some of Solovic's best tidbits (see sidebar) and combined

these with comments from successful women I interviewed for this article. I asked each of them the same questions and brought back a variety of tips. My contributors were Stephanie Britt (Executive Recruiter, Search Masters International), Ellie Cantor (Founder and Scientific Recruiter, CJ Resources), Gayle Deflin (CEO, Ionian Technologies), Judy Heyboer (Consultant, formerly VP Human Resources, Genentech), Jan Gensheimer (Executive Director, NPower Michigan), and Caroline Ruggieri (Manager International Relations, BIO).

*Can communication skills be a hang-up for women entering the business world from a graduate program or science degree?*

- "There are definitely some communication issues that these women will need to think about if they plan a move to industry. A few examples: I think that women aren't as good at asking for favors as part of business barter, which is how so

### **Practical Tips for Women From *The Girls' Guide to Power and Success***

- **Turn up the volume.** Susan Wilson Solovic suggests that you project, enunciate, and make your statements much more declarative than hesitant. Women need to sound in control and committed to their ideas.
- **Beware of the "but" syndrome.** Watch that you don't add disclaimers to your ideas. State them with

much gets accomplished in industry. Also, I find that women don't leverage their networks as well as men (which may be a byproduct of life-work balance and its limiting impact on networking time). Lastly, I think women bring their children into conversations more often than men as an icebreaker." -- Jan Gensheimer

- "Women who try to communicate like men often get labeled as aggressive or worse because their behavior does not fit the expectations for how women should act." --Ellie Cantor
- "I think women

conviction!

- **Interrupting is OK.** Don't always wait for your turn. If you have something to say, jump into the conversation.
- **Drill down to the bottom line.** Men don't want to hear every little detail; stick to the facts and get to the point.
- **Stop saying "I'm sorry."** Women apologize much more frequently than men, even when they haven't done anything wrong.
- **Strive to control fidgeting.** Watch for compulsive head-bobbing. Nodding "yes, yes, yes" to men signals utter agreement and deference.
- **Lighten up.** Women who mean business tend to take everything too seriously. A little humor can be a great addition to a

still don't have permission to be stern or harsh in communication without larger repercussions than men face." --Jan Gensheimer

- "Sometimes women need to be coached away from the extremes, as they appear too confrontational or too soft. Finding the right balance between too-direct and too-gentle is a problem for *both* men and women, but sometimes women think of it as a gender issue. It's really more of a communication skill." --Judy Heyboer

presentation. It will ease tension and win allies.

- **Don't put yourself down.** Never fear a little ethical self-promotion, and remember that there is never anything charming about self-depreciation. Positive doesn't have to come across as pompous.

Adapted from Susan Wilson Solovic's *The Girls' Guide to Power and Success*, AMACOM, 2003.

*What communication skill did you learn to develop as you became successful?*

- "Often scientists will present their ideas to me in management meetings. I have learned to ask, 'I need to understand that concept better; please explain it to me.' By doing this, I find that not only do I get the benefit of the additional detail behind the concept, I find that other experts start to weigh

in and that my call for a better explanation actually benefits everyone in the room. I've learned that it isn't a bad thing to express a need for more information." --Gayle Deflin

- "One of the first things I learned was to communicate criticism in a kind and constructive manner. It is so easy for one's comments to be taken negatively. This is a very difficult skill to acquire." --Caroline Ruggieri
- "I was very shy in my earlier years. It took a long time for me to overcome my discomfort at introducing myself to new people with confidence. I learned that a firm handshake and a friendly smile are useful tools for greeting people. I also learned to be a better listener." --Ellie Cantor
- "A more measured, less hurried speech pattern keeps my naturally high-pitched voice lower and more professional. I've also learned to use my naturally soft voice as an advantage, getting people to listen more intently when I need them to do so." --Judy Heyboer
- "I learned that women are more likely to minimize their opinion by saying something like "It's just my opinion" or "I'm not sure if you agree with this," and other qualifiers that diminish the impact of the contribution before it is even offered. Others will embellish with examples, burying the impact of the point in a longer story." --Jan Gensheimer

*Have you had to adapt your communication style to work better with men?*

- "I try to take cues from the individual and tailor my communication to fit the other person's comfort level. I've never really considered it a man/woman issue. Some people are open and reveal their thoughts freely, while others pass out information only in very small pieces. I have more of an open communication style, and I had to learn that my style may not induce the most positive result when speaking with someone who communicates differently." --Stephanie Britt
- "I believe it to be the difference in *how* men and women communicate more so than just adapting a communication style. It is the very ability of women to articulate feelings and be good listeners that causes the problem. Men don't communicate that way, and many women don't understand how men interact. Even body language and relative positioning during a conversation is different for men and women. For me, seeing training videos on this topic was quite educational. One example that stands out in my mind is the following: A woman is trying to solve a problem at work. She asks her male colleagues for their opinions, evaluates what she has learned, and synthesizes something that seems best for her. The men are frustrated because she didn't do what they told her in their responses. Their reaction is something like, 'She asked me what to do and then she didn't take my suggestion. Why should I waste my time helping her in the

future? --Ellie Cantor

- "Sometimes there are situations where the lack of time is a key factor. Because getting right to the point without first having established some level of comfort does not come naturally to me, I have found that up-front planning prior to the business contact is crucial. By defining my objectives and 'practicing' prior to a meeting, I am able to take a more direct approach." --Stephanie Britt

*Are there differences between the way men and woman promote themselves?*

- "Women don't often like to engage in ego contests with men, so they perhaps create the impression that they are less willing to promote themselves. But hey--get a group of women together and they are perfectly capable of self-promotion." --Judy Heyboer
- "Sometimes women try to let their actions speak for themselves in the workplace. I often assume that my hard work and success will speak for itself and do not feel comfortable with 'tooting my own horn.' However, when it comes time for a promotion or job interview, it is essential to be able to sell others on one's key accomplishments and strengths." --Stephanie Britt
- "There are cultural considerations as well as generational ones. I think younger women who have had successful women as mentors and role

models are learning what it takes to sell their abilities as men do." --Ellie Cantor

## **In Conclusion**

Many of the comments above would apply to men as well as women. When you analyze the interactions that occur on a daily basis, it is easy to see that communication skills are essential to everyone.

Today's workplace is entirely different than that of our parents. It poses a cross-cultural and cross-gender communication challenge, but there is much more potential for productivity. This comment from Jan Gensheimer sums it up: "I find that women offer a different perspective than men, not only in communication, but in management styles. That diversity makes for a better final plan, a better final decision, a better final message. The trick is for women to recognize the value of their own contribution, even when, and especially when, it is not representative of the dominant position in the room."

---

### **RELATED ARTICLES**

1. [Women in Science: The Heart of the Matter](#)  
By Douglas Curran-Everett, 2 Jun 2000
2. [Women in Science: Academia or Industry?](#)  
By Kirstie Urquhart, 2 Jun 2000
3. [Site Review: Women in the Engineering Industry](#)

---

## By Next Wave Staff, 3 Jul 1998

Copyright © 2003 by the American Association for the  
Advancement of Science.