

The ultimate cultural difference — and how to bridge it

Sushi in Paris, barbecue in Kyoto, couscous in Dallas. Today it can be hard to recognise where you are. Managers in multinational environments are challenged by the exotic and the foreign in numerous ways. Expertly versed in the styles, mannerisms, and personalities of other cultures, Dr Simons detects "potential misunderstandings simmering" in many a manager's office.

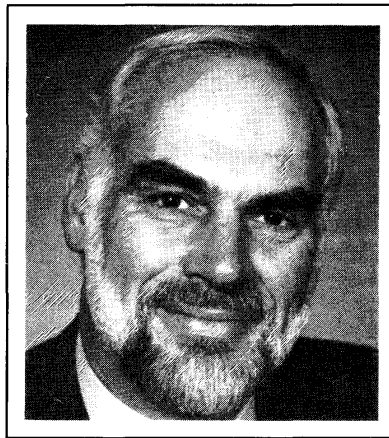
George Simons

First there are national characteristics in the way people do business. While negotiating, the French have a predilection for seeking broad agreement about principles before attacking detail. The Americans across the table are frustrated as they seek to tie off one small item at a time in order to create a "deal". Both the French and the Americans, however, are likely to be deep in detailed discussion before their Japanese counterparts would be satisfied that the proper preliminaries had been celebrated. But what if the negotiators are Morihara Sakamuru who got his MBA at Harvard, Frank Adams who grew up in Brussels, or Jean-Paul Martin who lives in Nairobi. Personal experience and gender differences may belie what we presume to be other people's cultural style.

Despite unprecedented numbers of women in the workplace, and their presence in the ranks of management, despite an international woman's movement and the proliferation of women's concerns in the media for decades, despite radical modernisation in many societies, men and women in almost all situations are still:

- Talked to and talked about differently
- Touched and approached differently
- Dressed and dealt with through role assumptions and expectations that are significantly different.

Check your own experience. This disparate treatment is due to habit—unconsciously learned and practised. It



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is so deep-rooted that even insistent egalitarians, whose sons have dolls and whose daughters scrimmage at football, constantly treat boys and girls differently without even knowing it.

Everyone knows that women are more poorly paid, less frequently promoted, and are allowed less time to speak at meetings. Management studies have shown that they are given a

less useful feedback on their performance, assigned domestic duties in the workplace and so on. Yet, the public complaints and private distresses of women do not disappear when aired, legislated, and financed, because they are only symptoms of more deeply entrenched cultural and linguistic dynamics.

This article is not a campaign for changing sex roles or altering masculinity and femininity. It will end with *vive la difference*. To celebrate and profit from that difference, you must first explore why the sexes both understand and fail to understand each other from kindergarten to the boardroom.

Different languages

Separate and unequal treatment that men and women experience throughout life, irrevocably divides them into two separate cultures with distinctive languages. These languages are always spoken in our minds, and are usually expressed as well verbally. The grammar and vocabulary of our spoken and written language provide different thinking patterns and unequal levels of power and confidence to men and women. We are inclined to think of ourselves first as Dutch or British or Chinese and then as men and women, when in fact we are male and female first, then Greek or Brazilian or Japanese.

If you have never shuffled back to your office after encountering the opposite sex, shaken your head and muttered, "I don't think we speak the same language," you are an exception to the rule. You were, of course, right.

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Though both of you communicate in the same language, what you intend to say and what you actually say can be worlds apart.

Male and female reality is different. What we say and do, what we feel and want, what our work means to us, even in seemingly identical business matters, often throws us into conflict with one another. For example:

- In strategic planning he chooses a high-risk strategy, she a low-risk
- She thinks he does not tell her enough about the project; he does not tell her certain things because he does not think she needs to know
- She finds a piece of advertising copy insulting; he finds it humorous
- At meetings he finds her either too slow to participate or too stridently aggressive; she finds it impossible to speak and be heard, and feels constantly interrupted
- As the deadline approaches both find each other's emotional states irrational and a nuisance.

Employees receive cultural briefings on how to behave in Beijing or Riyadh, but is anyone briefed on the way to live and work with the other sex? Though we are prepared for assignments abroad at professional language institutes, we are not trained in man-talk or woman-talk.

On the streets abroad, or in company boardrooms, we expect to find a different culture. Alien attitudes and behaviour may annoy and unnerve us. At the outset we may have preconceptions of foreigners, but eventually, if we have any business sense at all, we learn to understand, accept and work with other cultures. We learn how they express themselves and their sense of time and courtesy. We begin to understand their customs and habits that may be alien to our culture. We also teach them about ourselves, and simultaneously about who we are!

Blaming the other

This does not apply to the cultural and linguistic peculiarities created by gender. We assume that men and women should understand each other and behave as we expect them to behave. When they do not, we withdraw and blame them. "Just like a woman!" or, "Stupid, insensitive man!" Anger, frustration and resentment become the currency between the sexes, instead of curiosity, creative exploration, fresh possibilities and realis-

tic commitments.

Both researchers and lay people disagree about the differences between men and women. We cannot deny biology, but how we fight its implications. Feminists not only demand social and economic change but also make it clear that a patriarchal culture alienates and oppresses both women and men. Some feminists see greater benefit for their own sex in denying or playing down differences between the sexes. To assume equality may be a better strategy than fighting for it. Some people believe that maintaining distinct sexual differences and playing at sexual politics gives them a tactical advantage. Some simply accept their privilege or plight automatically. Everyone plays the game in one way or another.

Frontiers between men and women are not identical in every culture. Women and men treat each other differently in different environments. Nor are gender differences consistent or predictable for all individuals. In a culture with a very high masculinity index a man may express very little machismo. Gender differences are not right or wrong, better or worse. But deny them and they only cause more of the misunderstanding and conflict.

What keeps gender issues from being seen and dealt with? Very few people try to calculate the cost that male and female conflict adds to business. Admitting that men and women may not understand each other nearly as well as we assume, opens a Pandora's box in both our business and personal lives.

Several simple insights and skills can make a great difference in how men and women understand each other and work together productively:

- Men and women together constitute a cross-cultural situation
- Neither is right or wrong, they simply have certain differences and speak different languages
- Every individual is unique both within the context of his or her sexual and national, racial, and corporate culture
- Gender and personal differences are corporate assets that can make the enterprise more creative and productive if conflict is handled well.

We can take advantage of gender differences instead of condemning, denying, avoiding, or trying to change each other. To work and live together

successfully, men and women must learn to be clear that expectations about each other are not commitments. An expectation is how we believe another person should think, feel or act. "She should know not to disturb me with such a trivial question," or, "He should acknowledge my contribution on this project." Either we do not communicate this inner demand to the other person, or, if we do, we fail to gain an agreeable response. We then begin to feel upset or blame the other person.

Not seeing eye-to-eye

To illustrate this point further: I expect my female associate or subordinate to behave according to standards which I believe are obvious. "I shouldn't need to tell her about it unless something goes wrong," I say to myself. She on the other hand, expects regular feedback from me and says to herself, "I shouldn't have to ask for it. Maybe he dislikes me or thinks I'm not competent: why is he so standoffish!" Both of us become annoyed because we feel that the other "should have known better."

Acknowledging that there is a difference between expectation and commitments helps us to spell out our expectations so that we can agree about what we should give and receive from one another. To do this, one must ask questions that encourage the other person to paint a full picture of what he or she understands and means to communicate to us. We frequently question the reason behind decisions and our curiosity is often understood as "I don't believe you," "Defend yourself," or "Show me your reasons and I will tell you why they are wrong." Questions which ask for opinions without appearing to attack the other person are:

- What does . . . mean to you?
- What do you say to yourself about . . . ?
- How do you picture the situation?
- What do you see as the pros and cons of . . . ?

There are many more questions that can be used to understand people who are different from ourselves. Since unspoken languages play a major role in how we communicate, body language and tone of voice must convey interest rather than aggression.

On the other hand, even if the other person does not ask such questions, we can respond as if they did, if we share fuller, more descriptive pictures of how

A patriarchal culture alienates and oppresses both women and men

we ourselves see, interpret and talk to ourselves about the issue at hand. We can voice our own opinions in such a way that we tell the listener that we are contributing our own experience and offering our ideas, rather than dictating opinions. For example:

- Here's how I see . . .
- Here's what happened to me that leads me to think . . .
- I imagine that if . . .
- Some of constraints are . . .

It is important not to present one's opinions as the only valid representation of reality. When men start to speak for ourselves this way, we reduce the linguistic power distance which separates us as men and women. By not assuming that our personal or gender viewpoints represent the absolute truth, we involve the points of view of others and gain a better picture. Combining our insights enables us to make clear agreements.

We have a native reluctance to request and promise things because we do not know what the future will bring, nor can we read the other person's mind. Each commitment puts us at risk to want what we ask for or to fulfil our pledge, and to know what steps to take if this becomes difficult or impossible. As we never understand one another perfectly, all requests and promises are in danger of being broken at some point. Instead of feeling upset when this occurs, question the person carefully, elicit reasonable answers and this enables you to deal with the other person as well as your own feelings. You can then make a new commitment if needed.

Coping strategies

Understanding how to elicit information from each other, a use of clear language, the ability to apologise, gather information and start again when we fail, reduces the risk and lessens the reluctance to make commitments.

Would these methods take more time than our normal ways of dealing with each other? Yes. Can our business afford this time? Absolutely! If we subtract the time used in these methods from the time wasted in misunderstandings, avoidance, bickerings, false starts and "doing it wrong" the spreadsheet is in our favour.

Bridging the gap

Why all the fuss about men and women? Does it boil down to better communications? Yes and no—recognising the cross-cultural nature of gender collaboration as an issue in its own right alerts us to the true nature of the inexplicable gaps and failures we encounter in our attempts to understand and work with people of whatever sex, corporation or nationality. *Vive la difference!* Learn the skills and attitudes to bridge gender differences and you will have mastered what it takes to communicate and negotiate with almost everyone. □

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ODT, Inc. provides train-the-trainer programs for organizations who want to utilize their internal staff resources to deliver customized "managing cultural diversity" training programs. Inquiries about Diversity Awareness seminars and customized train-the-trainer events may be directed to Howard Bronstein, ODT, Inc. P.O. Box 134, Amherst, MA 01004 USA. Phone 413/634-5081.

For a complete listing of resources from ODT, including ordering information for George Simons' books:

Working Together: How to become more effective in a multicultural organization

Men and Women: Partners at Work

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in the Workplace: Working smoothly across differences (in press)

The Questions of Diversity: Assessment tools for organizations and individuals

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