

We All Need to Be Bilingual

By Stephanie MacKendrick

In our society, I believe we've come to the point where we all need to be bilingual, and furthermore, that it is essential to business that we do so. After all, if we are to communicate effectively, to share our vision and to make the most of our respective talents, then it is essential that we understand one another's language.

But before you speed-dial the nearest Berlitz crash course, I ought to clarify. Although mutual understanding and bilingualism is every bit as important in the context of our country's two official languages, I'll leave that quest to those who are more qualified. No, what I'm talking about is being bilingual in the *gender* sense, about being fluent in both male and female. It's a huge communications issue and one that shouldn't be ignored by women or men, from either a personal or professional perspective.

Take the business perspective. What's the first thing a sales person learns? Get to know your client. Find out how they think, what their needs are. Doing business in other regions or countries further illustrates this need: If you're doing business in Japan, you'd better understand what flies and what doesn't in the business community there or you could end up blowing a big deal by inadvertently offending the potential client, despite the best of intentions.

Whether you're dealing with clients or coworkers, the same respect and understanding is equally important regarding gender. Mistaken assumptions and misunderstandings are anathema to a productive workplace and despite the participation of women at every level, the workplace is still far from bilingual. Although the quest for bilingualism is tougher for members of the dominant male culture (since they do not always have the advantage of constant exposure to the other language and, being dominant, don't always have to deal with it), it's nonetheless a worthwhile goal: the differences enrich us and different perspectives strengthen us.

So, what got me thinking about all this? It was the dinner table, as my two teenage sons were engaging in their usual schtick – punching each other on the arm as a form of affection, laughing uncontrollably at references to bodily functions, having a grand old time insulting each other. It brought back fond memories of my childhood as the lone girl among three brothers. I was trying not to laugh, because, really, someone has to civilize these guys and show them the light. But when I saw the look of disgust on my husband's face, I burst into laughter. He grew up in a very civilized household, sisters only, very proper and very orderly. No wrestling whatsoever. No references to body parts, unless strictly necessary. His manners are impeccable and he's not the least bit squeamish talking about domestic topics of any sort. He understands and is comfortable with the nuances and subtleties of female communication.

I, on the other hand, learned how to lock just about anyone into a full nelson hold before I was halfway through grade school. I spoke fluent hockey and wrestling and knew how to interpret the difference between a friendly shot to the arm and one that was meant to provoke. I became immune to disgust at the obvious signs of a fully working digestive system.

My husband grew up speaking female and I grew up speaking male.

It took me years to realize that it had been a great advantage to me to understand the other language and to be comfortable in a male environment. I could comfortably walk into a room full of men and not notice that I was the only female. I could enjoy talking sports. I could fend off and deliver the kinds of jokes and one-upmanship that often characterize gatherings predominated by men.

My husband has benefited too. His work depends on customer service and he is a wiz at talking to his female customers, relating to them, commiserating, understanding. It is a great advantage, especially in his business, which is almost exclusively a male preserve.

In the same way that we've realized that emotional intelligence as a critical component to success as intellectual ability, I would bet that women and men with highly developed gender intelligence are far more likely to thrive in the workplace. Along with other forms of training, it strikes me as something that should be in every individual and company's game plan.