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How To Become Fluent In the Language of Power

Do you unconsciously give away your power in conversations? Here's how to make sure you stay in charge.

By Gloria Feldt



Author Gloria Feldt

the way that is the obvious way to her. You start a conversation so he can tell you what he wants and you can say what you want. And then you'll negotiate. He's quite happy to negotiate, but he'd never start the conversation that way."

Because men still control most of the clout positions in this country, we do need to become fluent in different conversational styles—and in asking directly for what we need, or what we desire, rather than hoping that our indirect statements will be interpreted correctly. And at the same time, we must insist that men reciprocate by understanding and becoming fluent in our communication styles, too.

Don't cede ground with nonverbal language

I was watching *The Today Show* on the day after a particularly devastating Wall Street drop. Lehman Brothers had just tanked, and Bank of America had bought Merrill Lynch. The economy seemed to be spinning out of

Linguist Deborah Tannen has devoted her career to studying the different "communications rituals" that men and women use, the different language cultures and worlds of words that we are socialized into due to gender. She is a very wise woman. I have profusely dog-eared and underlined copies of her groundbreaking first two books about male and female communications patterns—*That's Not What I Meant!* and *You Just Don't Understand*. "Men grow up in a world in which a conversation is often a contest, either to achieve the upper hand or to prevent other people from pushing them around," she explains. "For women, however, talking is often a way to exchange confirmation and support." Because the meanings we intend, and the nuances we apprehend, are tied to our gendered experiences of language, we've probably all had the experience of male-female conversation seeming bilingual.

When I interviewed Tannen, she gave me the example of a husband and wife in a car driving down the highway. The wife asks her husband, "Would you like to stop for coffee?" He answers honestly: "No, thank you." Because she had wanted to stop for coffee, she perceives his negative answer as an order she must accept and so she bristles that he didn't take her wishes into account. Later, when he senses or finds out she's annoyed, he is irritated that she did not just come right out and say what she meant, that she wanted to stop for coffee. For him, conversation is exchange of information. For her, it's a path to negotiation. "She's not playing games," Tannen said. "She's just asking in

control. To its credit, *Today* had set up an interview with two financial analysts, one male and one female. Matt Lauer was conducting the interview. As the cameras zeroed in on the two supposedly authoritative experts about to be interviewed, I saw classic power tools at work—or, in the case of the female expert, not. He was wearing a business suit and had neatly trimmed hair. She was wearing a sleeveless dress in a distracting print. Her wavy dark hair was flying loose all over her face—beautiful but less than businesslike.

When Matt asked the first question, he looked at the woman but didn't specifically call her by name. Rather than simply answering, she turned to the man as if to ask, "Do you want to take this or shall I?" Well, of course, he jumped right in and dominated the rest of the interview. She attempted to speak several times, but by that time the conversation between the male guest and Matt was off and running, and Miss Polite never had a chance to establish her authority. Her neck seemed to be made of rubber as she whipped her head back and forth from Matt to the male expert rather than training her eyes on the host or the camera.

I cringed as she kept bouncing her eyes and nodding her head deferentially at what the man was saying. When she finally had a chance to speak, she hedged her terms, using more words yet less specific language than was called for in a fast-paced television interview about a national crisis. She might have been the most knowledgeable expert in the world, but she squandered her power to communicate effectively by failing to use a few simple power tools available to all of us.

A counterlesson in how it's done was on air the next day, when *Today* had an all-female panel that included Jean Chatzky, NBC's personal finance editor, real estate mogul Barbara Corcoran, and CNBC's Sharon Epperson. All of them looked directly at Matt or the camera, spoke with strong voices, and wore feminine but strong business suits with jackets. Their attire wouldn't have given them authority had their words not been substantive. But their appearance didn't interfere with their credibility. Each spoke with clarity, and firmly expressed her point of view. Was the dynamic different because there were no men on this panel? I don't know, but having watched these three savvy women define their own terms first on other occasions, I suspected each of them could hold her own anywhere.

The days are long gone, fortunately, when women thought we had to wear severe navy suits, menswear shirts, and those silly bow ties in order to be taken seriously. In a perfect world, we would be judged purely by our merits, and would each feel free to be ourselves in the fullest possible sense of the term—whether shy or bold, piping up in our squeaky voices or intoning our thoughts in a deeper register, dressed in business suits or cute sundresses or cozy jeans. But in order to get there—to be able to define the rules of the game and set the standards under which judgments are made—we have to become fluent in the language of power.

The key is to be aware of self-presentation to ensure that you can command the conversation from the outset.

Here how to take command:

- **SAY THE FIRST WORD.** Almost always, the first word is what sets the tone of the whole conversation. Be poised, prepared, and ready to get the first word in during any debate. Play offense, not defense. Don't hesitate. Don't apologize for having ideas or expectations, and don't end every sentence with an intonation rise as though it were a question. Dive in. No excuses. You are ready. Define yourself. Define the terms of the debate if there is one. Set the agenda.

- **SAY THE LAST WORD.** If you're in a tough discussion, stick with it until the end. Speak with authority and clarity. Use simple declarative sentences. Don't hedge your words, or append endless qualifications to your arguments. Speak as though you know you will be believed. Reembrace, you're on the right side of history. (I don't mean to hang on to arguments like a dog on a bone; I mean not giving up without speaking your piece to your own satisfaction.)

- **SPEAK THE LANGUAGE.** Understand the conversational rituals that distinguish different styles of communication and deploy them to your advantage. Even if this doesn't come naturally at first, it's a tactic that can be learned and that can become second nature. This isn't about being disingenuous, but about making sure your authentic self emerges and is communicated to the world the way you want yourself to be seen. Being multilingual (and by this I mean being able to communicate with both men and women) expands your world without having to compromise yourself. But in any language, what your mother told you was mostly right. Think

about what you're wearing, your posture, the way you enter a room. Make a good first impression. Make eye contact. Smile. Sit up straight.

Your vision, ideas, and plans have the power to shape the future, but not if you keep them to yourself. Set the agenda; don't wait for someone else to set it. Be a thermostat, not a thermometer. Define the terms—first.

From the book [No Excuses: 9 Ways Women Can Change How We Think about Power](#) by [Gloria Feldt](#). Excerpted by arrangement with Seal Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group, Copyright © 2010.

[Gloria Feldt](#) is a nationally renowned activist and author whose passion for social justice has propelled her life's work. Her previous books include the New York Times bestseller *Send Yourself Roses*, coauthored with actress Kathleen Turner, *Behind Every Choice Is a Story*, and *The War on Choice*.

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