

# **LeaderPerfect Newsletter**

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## **Talking Face to Face? Or Going Toe to Toe?**

by Dr. Mike Armour

She was bright, confident, and a proven, solid performer. But when word came that she was joining our staff, a collective groan went up.

Most of us had worked with her before. Which basically meant that we had all been through run-ins with her. There was just something about her that got under your skin. Now she was assigned to a desk only feet away.

Once she arrived, everyone vowed to make the best of things, all the while fearing an unpleasant experience. And within a matter of days, our fears were realized. Confrontations with her became daily fare. Something was terribly wrong in the chemistry.

"But why?" I kept asking myself. None of us doubted her ability or dedication. And she obviously wanted our organization to succeed. So why was it so difficult to work with her?

### **In Your Face**

The answer hit me one night over dinner with a newer member of our team. He had met her for the first time just days before, but already he was eager to avoid her. Trying to describe how she irked him, he noted, "You know, I think I could enjoy working with her if she would just get out of my face."

That was it!! I had never put my finger on it until that moment. But it was true. You always felt that she was in your face. And in fact, she was. Whenever she talked to you, she drew very close, so close that her nose was mere inches away. And she looked directly into your eyes, never breaking eye contact, while pressing her point.

To her, this was a natural way to communicate. In her mind it signaled that she was forceful, assured of her views, and needed to be taken seriously.

But to men on that senior management staff, her manner was intimidating. It violated two fundamental, but unwritten rules of communication. I call these the rules for "facing" and "spacing." To be effective communicators we must always be sensitive to these rules, especially when talking to someone of the opposite gender.

## Facing

When two men stand conversing, they usually position themselves at an angle to one another. They are not genuinely face-to-face, as though looking directly into a mirror. Instead, their bodies form two sides of a "V." They then turn their heads slightly to make contact as they talk.

Even when men share meals at a restaurant, they tend to keep their chairs facing each other only for the meal. When it's finished, one of them is likely to turn his chair at an angle to continue the conversation.

In general, men stand squarely face-to-face with another male only in settings of confrontation. In fact, they call it going "toe to toe." Or "squaring off" against someone.

Women, conversely, tend to prefer being squared up to their conversational partner. When women face counterparts squarely in conversation, they feel they are showing authentic concern for the other person's views and are building stronger interpersonal connection. At your next social event, notice how women position themselves during paired conversation in contrast to the way men do.

What you see in that difference points to one of the great challenges in male-female communication. For men, talking to someone face-to-face, toe-to-toe implies confrontation. For women, the same positioning suggests connection or compassion.

So what happens when a man and a woman speak? Usually, the woman defers to the man's preference. When he turns obliquely to her, she foregoes any shift that would square them up again. There's no rule requiring her deference. But it happens so predictably in our culture that it's something of an unspoken norm.

Unfortunately, our antagonist in the office was not so amenable. Conversation with her was like an endless dance. The man with whom she was talking would shift his posture, turning to a slight angle. Immediately, she would reposition herself to square things up again. Watching this play out, I understood why some of the men would complain, "I just can't get away from her!!" She was violating the "facing" rule.

## Spacing

In many parts of the world people stand quite close as they talk to one another, much closer than we do in the U.S. When I'm conversing with friends from those regions, a voice inside keeps urging me to back up, to put more space between us.

On the other hand, backing up will only make things uncomfortable for them, since they feel more at ease "up close and personal." Even though the two of us may be speaking amiably, beneath the surface we are waging a spatial cultural war.

Which brings me back to the staff unrest about a colleague who was "always in your face." She had been reared and educated overseas. Her concept of appropriate spacing was quite different from what men on our staff found comfortable. She simply moved in too close when she wanted to converse.

The problem compounded itself because she was female. Men commonly feel ill at ease when conversing with a woman who faces them straight on and stands closer than arm's length. Keep in mind that men sense a "squared stance" as aggressive. Outside of immediate family, most men are "face-to-face" with a woman in such close proximity only when dancing or hugging an intimate friend. (We even refer to limiting intimacy as "keeping someone at arm's length.")

Putting those two things together, a man may feel he is coming across aggressively, even as sexually aggressive if he faces a woman squarely and stands nearer than arm's length. To diffuse that impression (especially in a day of rampant sexual harassment suits), he will tend to "soften his stance" by pulling back and turning slightly to the side. Now the facing and spacing feel better for him.

## **Adaptability**

What I've said thus far is not intended to pick on a female colleague for ignoring the rules of facing and spacing. I know dozens of men who are equally oblivious to these conventions, and I could have easily used them as examples.

Instead, my purpose is to make an important point about how we respond as communicators. We've all come to understand that listening well is just as vital to good communication as speaking well. Another critical form of response is how we adapt ourselves to the non-verbal preferences of those with whom we communicate. And that includes their rules of facing and spacing.

The most successful communicators are usually highly adaptable. They show true behavioral flexibility in the way they communicate. Flexibility gives them more avenues through which to convey their thoughts, more channels through which to genuinely hear others. And their behavioral flexibility also maximizes the number of people with whom they can build deep rapport.

To be master communicators, therefore, we need to increase our personal flexibility. And that's as true with the rules of facing and spacing as it is with speaking and listening. Our goal as communicators, first and foremost, is to put the other party at ease. That means learning to be comfortable in his or her comfort zone, even if it's not our own.

When you engage in conversation, especially with someone you are meeting for the first time, let the other party negotiate the facing and spacing profile. Start off by positioning yourself at about the distance most people stand when shaking hands. If you are speaking to a woman, "square up." If you're talking to a man, turn your body ever so slightly.

Then let the other person react. Let your conversational partner make the adjustments that leaves him or her most at ease. If the other person stands "too close for comfort," don't give in to your urge to pull away. If your counterpart's stance feels too aggressive or too intimate, resist your temptation to step back (unless you get other signals that the other party is indeed intent on aggression or inappropriate intimacy).

Rather than focus on your discomfort, use the opportunity as a learning experience. Learn a new dimension of flexibility. Learn how to experience someone else's comfort zone and be comfortable within it yourself.

Let me warn that this will be a challenging exercise, even more so for men than for women. Our personal rules for facing and spacing are hard-coded (at an unconscious level) into our own sense of comfort zone. At first your unconscious mind is going to fight your determination to let the other person set the rules. But the unconscious mind learns through repetition, and over time it will quell its objections and allow your new response to others to feel natural.

Learning flexibility and adaptability always means adjusting our comfort zone. But the payback is an increased repertoire of interpersonal skills, and with it, enlarged effectiveness in communication.

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