
The Pitfalls of Giving Feedback Across Genders



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD

To best navigate gender divides, pay attention to perceived power imbalances.

As a woman teaching at a business school where most faculty members are men, I began thinking early on about how gender affects when and how we share our opinions. And just like how giving feedback across cultures requires tuning one's degree of bluntness, hitting the right note when giving feedback across genders calls for managers who know how to mitigate power dynamics.

Female leaders, much more than their male counterparts, face dual expectations. They are expected to be warm and nice (traits traditionally perceived as female) as well as competent and tough (traits traditionally expected from men and leaders). This is a difficult line to walk.

While women and men are equally likely to be described as technically competent, women are significantly more likely to be described as aggressive, according to one Stanford [study](#). Consequently, female leaders who provide candid feedback can easily be perceived as being on the attack.

The dynamics are just as complicated but completely different for men. In 2008, Rebecca Solnit wrote an [essay](#) titled, “Men Explain Things to Me: Facts Didn’t Get in Their Way”, which inspired the term “mansplaining”. In a nutshell, mansplaining is when a man explains something to a woman who knows more about it than he does. “Manvising” isn’t as popular a term, but most women have received male advice they neither asked for nor wanted.

In a more recent article, Solnit gave an illustration: “A few years ago, a friend of mine got married, and when I pulled up to the rustic wedding site, a man I didn’t know positioned himself behind my car to make dramatic hand signals. I didn’t need or ask for help, but he was giving it, and I’m sure he thought the credit for my success in parking my small car in this very easy spot was at least partly his.”

The key point is that, while providing advice can be generous and kind, the one who gives advice can unwittingly create the impression that they’re putting themselves above the recipient.

A perceived power imbalance

In Solnit’s example, the man presumably provided unsolicited advice because he thought that his skills were superior to hers. However, research shows that men are as likely to give advice to other men as they are to women, even when the person had not asked for it. And women give considerable amounts of advice to other women. But here is the key discrepancy: One research project showed that men are five times as likely to give unsolicited advice to women as women are to give it to men.

In interviews, I’ve found that while most men say they don’t engage in manvising, well over 90 percent of women report that they have, indeed, received unsolicited advice from their male colleagues recently.

One of my interviewees, a vice president in the tech industry (whom I’ll call “Cassandra”) provided an example. At a meeting attended by 2,000 colleagues, she had to give two presentations about a major project she was leading. The reception of her first presentation could make or break the project. Despite her worries, she felt she’d aced the presentation. Elated, she went to the speakers’ lounge to await her second turn. There she bumped into her colleague Miles.

Instead of a relaxing chitchat, Cassandra had to bear with Miles' unsolicited feedback. While the gist of it was positive, he also pointed to areas in need of improvement, such as Cassandra's pace and even how she should have stood further away from the microphone because her voice "sounded tinny".

While Miles had meant to help her, Cassandra felt he had hijacked her self-confidence. Now deflated, she felt like a clueless child receiving guidance from a teacher. The lesson: Even when feedback is genuinely helpful, it can give the person dispensing it emotional power over the receiver.

Feedback's hidden power boost - for the giver

When people get spontaneous feedback, their heart rate jumps to levels typically associated with moderate or extreme **duress**. The opposite happens to people who give advice - they feel more powerful.

For instance, in one **study**, 94 library employees were asked how often they gave advice at work. The results showed that the more advice someone gave, the more powerful that individual reported feeling. In another study, the same researchers asked 188 students to advise (in writing) a student struggling to choose a major. The students reported feeling more powerful after dispensing the advice and being told afterwards that the student had read it.

All this makes cross-gender feedback tricky. When a man provides feedback to a woman, the advice is likely to be perceived as belittling - even when the intention is sincere. This holds true when any other member of a majority offers advice to someone from an underrepresented group.

The three A's of feedback

So what's a manager to do? One useful approach is what I call the "**three A's of feedback**". The idea is to offer advice in a way that gets the message across while balancing the power dynamics.

The first A is that feedback must be intended to **assist**. It should always be provided with the genuine intention of helping your colleague succeed and never given just to get frustration off your chest.

The second is that it must be **actionable**. If your remarks don't clearly specify what your colleague can do to improve, it is best to keep them to yourself.

The third A is to **ask** for feedback before you provide it. This is especially important with cross-gender interactions. Always solicit suggestions about your own work before you offer anyone insights on their work. The only exception is when someone specifically requests for your advice.

If Miles had started by telling Cassandra, “I’d love to hear your thoughts about my presentation this morning,” he would have put her in a position of power before turning the tables. This would have led her to perceive his advice as valuable help rather than an attempt to assert dominance.

In sum, when sharing feedback across genders, first give the gift of power.

This is part 2 of a three-part series on the art of giving feedback in the age of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

This is an adaptation of an [article](#) published in HBR.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/pitfalls-giving-feedback-across-genders>

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