CHAPTER 4

Build Your... Communication Skills

During a planning session on corporate strategy, Melissa asks, “Do you think we should consider expanding into China?” when she really meant, “I think we should do business in China.”

When asked by her boss if he can see an early version of a report Sara is drafting, Sara responds by saying, “OK, here it is, sorry I didn’t get the graphics included yet but I can send them to you when I get them,” when she should have said, “Here is the in-process version of the report you requested. I’m on track to have the graphics included by the Friday deadline.”

After meeting with her assistant to explain that he is going to fail his performance review, Anne receives a call from the company human resources manager who indicates to Anne that the assistant has refused to sign the review document because it is inconsistent with the positive feedback he received in her conversation with Anne.

Cara is at a get acquainted reception with other new hires. When asked by a senior manager what interests she had in college, Cara responds, “I was on the golf team and hope to continue playing,” when it would have been more accurate to say, “I was captain of the golf team for three years and have a three handicap—I’m hoping that I’m able to keep that up as I dig into my career here.”

Each of these smart, articulate women made a common—but damaging—communication mistake. Could you tell? These examples illustrate that communication skills are a critical yet underdeveloped aspect of both personal and professional life. Communication is one of our earliest developed skills—one we put to use when we are just hours old (certainly a skill that Lindsay’s son used early on in his life—especially when she
had just settled in to work on this book). However, at times, it also feels like one of our least developed skills. Participate in an employee focus group on pretty much any topic, and inevitably, someone will raise the issue of poor communication. In a 2010 article in *Psychology Today* called “The Five Most Common Ways Bosses Screw Up,” the number one reason was undercommunicating.¹ Ask any married couple about communication issues and you’ll likely get an exasperated eye roll with both spouses ready to tick off a list of communication failures in their relationship. Surprising, in an era of smartphones, tablets, and bluetooth devices? Not really; the phrase “it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” still rings true in today’s connected world.

**The Issue**

If everyone needs to do a better job at communicating, what makes it an issue for women in the workplace? Extensive research and studies by a number of experts has definitively demonstrated that women communicate differently than men do, and too often, to their detriment. Women have a tendency to speak up less, apologize more, downplay their achievements, and use less-powerful body language. Not surprisingly, the basis for these gender differences in communication styles goes back to childhood.

Anna Fels, a psychiatrist and author of *Necessary Dreams, Ambition in Women’s Changing Lives*, describes how women view ambition and achievement. Her work demonstrates that in early childhood women learn to avoid visibility and recognition. For women, ambition implies negative traits—“egotism, selfishness,…the use of others for one’s own end.”² Women often deny success and their achievements. Men—and boys—are just the opposite; Fels writes that men view ambition as a necessary and desirable part of their lives. Directly linked to this issue of ambition, Fels catalogs the myriad of studies demonstrating that as a result, women solicit and receive less recognition than men receive. This indifference about ambition may help you get a date (though arguably not with the type of guy you want for a life partner) but in the workplace it turns out that it won’t get you much in terms of a promotion or a raise; and it certainly doesn’t serve women well when it results in women communicating in ways that downplay their achievements.

According to Flynn Heath Holt Leadership, a leadership development firm with a track record of working with women leaders, part of the problem is that women are too modest—they believe accomplishments should speak for themselves.³ Viewing raises and promotions as good things that happen to them instead of successes that resulted from their own hard work, means that women may miss opportunities to be to rewarded or recognized for their efforts. Similarly, in her article entitled “Why Women Lose Out,” Sandi Mann points out that women are aware of politics but dislike this aspect of organizations.⁴ For too many women, they see these communication issues