

Researcher finds that women are speaking up

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(PhysOrg.com) -- There's a whole industry of books and seminars that hinge on the premise that women somehow need to be "fixed" when it comes to communication and must change the way they talk and behave to advance their career.

Cecilia Ford, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of English language and linguistics, found just the opposite when she used her expertise in conversation analysis to document the experience of women in professional meetings in fields including science and engineering, where women have been traditionally underrepresented.

"What I was impressed with, really, was how effective the women in these meetings were," says Ford, who conducted the work in her role as a member of UW-Madison's Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute, funded by the National Science Foundation. The institute is working toward eliminating obstacles to women's academic advancement and raising awareness about the concerns of female scientists and engineers.

Ford, winner of a UW-Madison Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Award in 2005, outlines the results of that research in her new book, "Women Speaking Up: Getting and Using Turns in Workplace Meetings." Ford studied meetings involving women in science, engineering and medicine, as well as management and administration, including academic departments, industry and nonprofit organizations. She used videotape and detailed transcriptions to look not only at what people in meetings say, but also observed nonverbal cues such as gesture,

gaze and body position.

Ford says she knows the videotapes don't tell the whole story — women commonly report experiences where their ideas were rejected, only to hear them praised when men raised them later on — but she found substantive evidence of women getting and using their turns to speak. She decided that the original goal of pursuing the question of "how are women's ideas ignored?" would reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes.

"Given that I could see that women were doing a good job and ... it made more sense to me to use my skills to show, 'OK, here's how people get and use the floor,'" Ford says. "I'm not seeing that women are significantly different from men."

One of Ford's most striking findings was that women regularly used questions to gain the floor in meetings, a direct contrast to previous studies that identified women's use of questioning as a sign of weakness. Ford says that earlier research on women's language as distinct from men's observed that "women questioned more, rather than saying things for certain, so it was a reflection of women's uncertainty or insecurity."

But when Ford looked at the conversation that followed women asking questions in meetings, she found that the person who answered the question would then give the questioner a moment to affirm if her question was answered. The women Ford observed used that opportunity to take back the floor and make a major contribution to the meeting.

"(What) I found remarkable, given the research that's been done on women and language over the last three decades, was the power that I could see that questions had for getting someone the chance to speak, perhaps even at length," Ford says.

Some of the women Ford interviewed and observed indicated they would only speak up in meetings "when they really had something to say they thought was going to make a difference." But Ford says that deliberate silence was treated by colleagues as something purposeful and important to watch, with one woman reporting that when she did speak up, the reaction was "Oh ... she has something to say."

Ford says her book is as much about how people — both men and women — effectively participate in meetings than it is about just women. When she came across a conversation example that might reinforce stereotypes about women, she soon found examples of men doing the same thing.

"For instance, saying something like 'This may be stating the obvious,' ... prefacing what you say by a little bit of a downplaying," she says. "It's actually an effective thing to do. It probably disarms people. Men do it and women do it."

Ultimately, Ford says women don't need to "improve" their ways of speaking because they are already strong participants.

"What needs to be challenged are preconceptions and biased evaluations of women and other groups newer to the professional workplace," she says.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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