

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# Talking from 9 to 5

**WOMEN AND MEN AT WORK**

DEBORAH  
TANNEN

AUTHOR OF *YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND* AND  
*YOU'RE WEARING THAT?*

# **TALKING FROM 9 TO 5**

Women and Men  
at Work

**DEBORAH TANNEN, Ph.D.**

**HARPER**

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

## TO ADDIE AND AL MACOVSKI

*For information on a video program on women and men talking in the workplace, created by and featuring Deborah Tannen, please call ChartHouse International Learning Corporation at 800-328-3789.*

Permissions, constituting a continuation of the copyright page, appear on page 360.

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1994 by William Morrow.

TALKING FROM 9 TO 5. Copyright © 1994 by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First Avon Books edition published 1995.

Reissued in Quill 2001.

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:  
Tannen, Deborah, Ph.D.

Talking from 9 to 5/Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Business communication. 2. Communication in management.  
3. Communication—Sex differences. 4. Interpersonal relations. 5. Sex differences (Psychology) 6. Language and languages—Sex differences. 7. Women—Language. I. Title.

HF5718.T36 1994

94-4966

651.7—dc20

CIP

ISBN 0-380-71783-2 (pbk.)

08 07 06 FG/RRD 20 19 18 17

PRAISE FOR  
TALKING FROM 9 TO 5

"Her most intriguing work."

—*Boston Globe*

"Entertaining . . . highly recommended. . . . It raises many issues of concern to working women, from knocking against the glass ceiling to dealing with sexual harassment."

—*Library Journal*

"This wise and informative book . . . [is] filled with gracefully analyzed examples of job-related conversations; every page delivers a shock of recognition."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"She is an authority on why communication fails at work and [at] home. Tannen shows how deeply ingrained our sense of place is."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"For anyone who has ever sat through a meeting at the office, this book has the ring of truth."

—*Christian Science Monitor*

"What Tannen's millions of readers love about her work is that they recognize the people and the patterns they find there."

—*Newsweek*

"Tannen does a great service to men and women by providing a readable guide to the rituals of sexual miscommunication in the workplace."

—*Time*

"Offers fascinating insights. . . . It fills a vacuum left by our literature, which for decades has almost entirely ignored the small mysteries of the water cooler and the conference room, the ladies' room and the management retreat."

—*Washington Post Book World*

"Tannen breaks new ground."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Fascinating . . . a dissection of how men and women talk at work and how it affects their status."

—*Entertainment Weekly*



Linda Farwell

DEBORAH TANNEN is the author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly four years, including eight months at number one; *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*, winner of the Common Ground Book Award; *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*; and *I Only Say This Because I Love You: How the Way We Talk Can Make or Break Family Relationships Throughout Our Lives*. Her play *An Act of Devotion* is included in *The Best American Short Plays 1993-1994*. She is a frequent guest on television and radio news and information shows, including *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, *20/20*, *48 Hours*, *Today*, *CBS News*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America*, and NPR's *All Things Considered*. She has been featured in and written for most major newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *USA Today*, *People*, the *Washington Post*, and *Harvard Business Review*.

Dr. Tannen is a university professor and professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

# **TALKING FROM 9 TO 5**

Women and Men  
at Work

**DEBORAH TANNEN, Ph.D.**

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

## TO ADDIE AND AL MACOVSKI

*For information on a video program on women and men talking in the workplace, created by and featuring Deborah Tannen, please call ChartHouse International Learning Corporation at 800-328-3789.*

Permissions, constituting a continuation of the copyright page, appear on page 360.

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1994 by William Morrow.

TALKING FROM 9 TO 5. Copyright © 1994 by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

HarperCollins books may be purchased for educational, business, or sales promotional use. For information please write: Special Markets Department, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First Avon Books edition published 1995.

Reissued in Quill 2001.

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:  
Tannen, Deborah, Ph.D.

Talking from 9 to 5/Deborah Tannen, Ph.D.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Business communication. 2. Communication in management.  
3. Communication—Sex differences. 4. Interpersonal relations. 5. Sex differences (Psychology) 6. Language and languages—Sex differences. 7. Women—Language. I. Title.

HF5718.T36 1994

94-4966

651.7—dc20

CIP

ISBN 0-380-71783-2 (pbk.)

08 07 06 FG/RRD 20 19 18 17

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**his book could not have been written without the generosity of many companies and innumerable individuals who opened their doors and their lives to me. I talked to so many people at so many companies that it is impossible to mention them all by name, yet I want to express heartfelt appreciation to every one. Some of the companies that I can name, because they chose not to remain anonymous, are Ben & Jerry's, Chevron Overseas Petroleum Inc., Corning Inc., Essex County A.R.C., and Rohm and Haas. At all these and the other companies where I talked to people and observed interaction, I was deeply impressed and moved by the intelligence, dedication, and spirit of those who trusted me with their own stories and conversations. My greatest debt is to all of them.



Many generous colleagues and friends read drafts of the manuscript and offered comments. For their time, attention, and wisdom I am grateful to Carolyn Adger, A. L. Becker, Susan Faludi, Rom Harré, Shari Kendall, Keller Magenau, Sally McConnell-Ginet, Susan Philips, Dave Quady, Lucy Ray, Cynthia Read, Ron Scollon, Suzanne Scollon, Naomi Tannen, David Wise, Haru Yamada, and Keli Yerian. I may not have always listened to their suggestions, but the book is surely a better one for the times I did.

Three research assistants helped me examine the voluminous transcripts of conversation I had amassed: Shari Kendall, Keller Magenau, and Keli Yerian. Their insights greatly enriched my thinking.

My students are always a source of inspiration as I work out the ideas I am writing about. The students in my seminars during the year of final writing were especially helpful: Lena Gavrusova, Kunihiro Harada, Itoko Kawakami, Shari Kendall, Keller Magenau, Melanie Metzger, Gabriella Modan, and Keli Yerian. Over the years, Japanese students have taught me a great deal about the Japanese communication system, which has helped me understand the American system by setting it in relief. This is especially true of those whose dissertations I directed: Yoshiko Nakano, Shoko Okazaki, Suwako Watanabe, and Haru Yamada.

Many people offered examples or helped me see new perspectives in formal interviews, casual conversation, or unsolicited letters. I cannot possibly name everyone who has contributed to my understanding in these and other ways, but some I can name are listed here. Though I group them together, I know that each made a unique contribution, for which I earnestly offer my thanks: Madeleine Adkins, Susan Baer, Lisa Beattie, James Clovis, Frances Conley, Linda Convissor, Elton Couch, Florian Coulmas, Bertrand de Coquereaumont, Elizabeth Devereaux, David Downs, Craig Dunham, Beecher Eurich, Ralph Fasold, Ed Finegan, Geoff Freter, Richard Giannone, Karl Goldstein, Tracey Groomes, Sally Helgesen, Mark Curtis Jones, Beth Kobliner, Linda Lagace, Iris Litt, Mary Maggini, Anne Mancini, Judy Mann, Joanne Martin, Barbara Mathias, Richard Matzke, Maire McAuliffe, Adrienne

McClenny, Steve McFarland, Patricia McGuire, Marie McKee, David McMullen, Barbara Meade, Kathleen Much, Manjari Ohala, Dipo Omotayo, Livia Polanyi, Juliet Porch, Dave Quady, Linda Raedeke, Erle J. Rappaport, Cynthia Read, Adele Reinhartz, Julie Richardson, Kathleen Curry Santora, Carole Schaefer, Nahum Schneidermann, Robert Scott, Catherine Shaw, Elaine Showalter, Elizabeth Solernou, Richard T. Starnes, Charles Tatum, Gordon Ting, Bill Watson, Mona Wexler, Lenny Winter, Clare Wolfowitz, Nancy Woodhull, Sharon Young, and Stan Yunick.

My own study of doctor-patient communication that I draw from in Chapter Five was done at the Georgetown University Child Development Center. I am grateful to the staff and especially to the mother and doctor for their permission to analyze and quote from their interaction.

Much of the research for this book was done while I was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California. In addition to the luxury of a quiet office with a lovely view and no telephone (but access to e-mail), and the ministrations of a large and uniformly helpful staff, the center provided the opportunity for enlightening discussions with other Fellows. Particularly helpful to me were conversations with George Cowgill, Dorothy Ross, Susan Watkins, and Richard Yarborough. I shall always be grateful for this yearlong taste of academic heaven, and for the financial support provided by the National Science Foundation SES-9022192 to the center.

Working with my editor, Sally Arteseros, was a revelation and a joy. I came to admire and trust her unfailingly wise and prompt editorial judgment. As always, my agent, Suzanne Gluck, has been a tireless advocate at every step.

My family is a continuing a source of strength. My sisters Miriam and Naomi provided specific discussions of their own experiences as well as general encouragement, and Naomi read an early draft and offered invaluable comments. My parents, Dorothy and Eli Tannen, also made comments on parts of the manuscript, about which my mother commented, with characteristic pithiness, "I read it for enjoyment; Daddy sits down with a pencil and paper to

see what he can correct.” Both his corrections and her enjoyment were of great value to me; my abiding appreciation for differing styles begins with them.

My husband, Michael Macovski, has been a companion and supporter in every way. It would be redundant to dedicate book after book to him, yet he is the one who has accompanied me on each of these journeys, during the nine years we have been together. I dedicate this book to his parents, for the love and unquestioning support they have shown me, and for having helped make their son who he is.

# CONTENTS

PREFACE	11
A NOTE ON NOTES AND TRANSCRIPTION	19
ONE Women and Men Talking on the Job	21
TWO "I'm Sorry, I'm Not Apologizing": Conversational Rituals	43
THREE "Why Don't You Say What You Mean?": Indirectness at Work	78
FOUR Marked: Women in the Workplace	107
FIVE The Glass Ceiling	132
SIX "She's the Boss": Women and Authority	160
SEVEN Talking Up Close: Status and Connection	204
EIGHT What's Sex Got to Do with It?	242
NINE Who Gets Heard?: Talking at Meetings	276
AFTERWORD	311
NOTES	319
REFERENCES	345
INDEX	361



## P R E F A C E

**I**n my mind, this book is the third in a series. In *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations With Others*, I laid out the framework of conversational style that I have spent the last two decades researching. That framework is a linguistic approach to understanding relationships: People have different conversational styles, influenced by the part of the country they grew up in, their ethnic backgrounds and those of their parents, their age, class, and gender. But conversational style is invisible. Unaware that these and other aspects of our backgrounds influence our ways of talking, we think we are simply saying what we mean. Because we don't realize that others' styles are different, we are often frustrated in conversations. Rather than see-

ing the culprit as differing styles, we attribute troubles to others' intentions (she doesn't like me), abilities (he's stupid), or character (she's rude, he's inconsiderate), our own failure (what's wrong with me?), or the failure of a relationship (we just can't communicate).

In *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, I narrowed the focus to patterns of conversational style influenced by gender. Based on the assumption that we learn styles of interacting as children growing up, and that children tend to play in sex-separate groups in which very different styles are learned, practiced, and reinforced, the book proceeded from the metaphor of male-female conversation as cross-cultural communication.

The two earlier books are about private speaking, focusing primarily (though not exclusively) on one-on-one conversations between intimates and friends. This book is concerned with private speaking in a public context—the talk that goes on at work, particularly in offices. It is private in the sense that many of the conversations I analyze are still one-on-one, except for meetings and presentations. They are also “private” compared to the public contexts of speaking on radio or television, or giving a lecture. Yet the work setting is public, in that most of the people you talk to at work are not family you know intimately, nor friends or partners you have chosen, but strangers into whose midst you have been thrown by the circumstances of your job. Another way that work mixes public and private is simply a matter of time: Although our private relationships with family and friends are the center of our emotional lives, many of us spend more hours of our lives at work with colleagues and co-workers, some of whom eventually become friends or even family.

There is another sense in which talk at work is public. No matter how private a conversation is, in most work settings your performance will be evaluated at some point, by a boss, a board, a client, a colleague, or a subordinate. Conversations at work can be, in a sense, like a test. What we say as we do our work can become evidence on which we are judged, and the judgments may surface in the form of raises (or denials of raises), promotions (or their lack

or their opposite), and favorable (or unfavorable) work assignments.

These three books make up what social scientists call an implicational hierarchy. Everything I said in *That's Not What I Meant!* applies to the two books that follow, and everything I wrote in *You Just Don't Understand* applies here, even though I obviously cannot repeat those books as a preface to this one. Although I may talk about "women" and "men," I am always aware, and remind readers to be aware, that—as *That's Not What I Meant!* shows in detail—gender is only one of many influences on conversational style. Each individual has a unique style, influenced by a personal history of many influences such as geographic region, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, occupation, religion, and age—as well as a unique personality and spirit. Patterns that I describe are always a matter of degree, of a range on a continuum, not of absolute difference, when it comes to gender as well as the other influences and affiliations I just mentioned. In other words, our ways of talking are influenced by every aspect of our communities, so no two women or two men are exactly alike, any more than any two New Yorkers or Spaniards or forty-year-olds are necessarily alike. Yet understanding the patterns of influence on our styles is crucial to understanding what happens to us in our conversations—and our lives.

Although I am aware of the many influences on conversational style and have spent most of my career studying and writing about them, in this book, as in *You Just Don't Understand*, style differences influenced by gender receive particular attention. This is not only because these are the differences people most want to hear about (although this is so and is a factor), but also because there is something fundamental about our categorization by gender. When you spot a person walking down the street toward you, you immediately and automatically identify that person as male or female. You will not necessarily try to determine which state they are from, what their class background is, or what country their grandparents came from. A secondary identification, in some places and times, may be about race. But, while we may envision a



day when a director will be able to cast actors for a play without reference to race, can we imagine a time when actors can be cast without reference to their sex?

Few elements of our identities come as close to our sense of who we are as gender. If you mistake people's cultural background—you thought they were Greek, but they turn out to be Italian; you assumed they'd grown up in Texas, but it turns out they're from Kentucky; you say "Merry Christmas" and they say, "we don't celebrate Christmas; we're Muslim"—it catches you off guard and you rearrange the mental frame through which you view them. But if someone you thought was male turns out to be female—like the jazz musician Billy Tipton, whose own adopted sons never suspected that their father was a woman until the coroner broke the news to them after his (her) death—the required adjustment is staggering. Even infants discriminate between males and females and react differently depending on which they confront.

Perhaps it is because our sense of gender is so deeply rooted that people are inclined to hear descriptions of gender *patterns* as statements about gender *identity*—in other words, as absolute differences rather than a matter of degree and percentages, and as universal rather than culturally mediated. The patterns I describe are based on observations of particular speakers in a particular place and time: mostly (but not exclusively) middle-class Americans of European background working in offices at the present time. Other cultures evince very different patterns of talk associated with gender—and correspondingly different assumptions about the "natures" of women and men. I don't put a lot of store in talk about "natures" or what is "natural." People in every culture will tell you that the behaviors common in their own culture are "natural." I also don't put a lot of store in people's explanations that their way of talking is a natural response to their environment, as there is always an equally natural and opposite way of responding to the same environment. We all tend to regard the way things are as the way things have to be—as only natural.

The reason ways of talking, like other ways of conducting our