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Dream Like a Man, Plan Like a Woman?

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Mentors are commonly seen as the secret sauce behind entrepreneurial success. But what if the way they communicate the advice they give, not just how much or how often, affects the confidence and motivation of the entrepreneurs they're trying to help? And what if that advice changes based on gender? That's exactly what this research uncovered: the way mentors communicate with entrepreneurs, whether their advice is big-picture or detail-focused, differs depending on both the mentor's and entrepreneur's gender. And the consequences of these subtle patterns are more significant than you might think.

Abstract vs. Concrete: Two styles of advice

Not all advice is given the same way; mentors can communicate abstractly (big picture) or concretely (detailed). Imagine you are launching a startup. For example, imagine Sara Blakely, the founder of Spanx, being told early on to "understand her customer's lifestyle" (abstract) versus being advised to "ask five women each day how her product fits and feels" (concrete). Abstract advice helps to think long-term, dream bigger, and stay creative. It inspires strategic thinking. In contrast, concrete advice is about short-term, task-specific steps, actionable, but potentially limiting if that's all you get.

After conducting a series of experiments with over 600 participants it was found that female entrepreneurs receive more concrete advice than their male counterparts. Female mentors are particularly likely to give concrete advice and even more concrete when they are advising female entrepreneurs. Moreover, female mentors are also more likely to adjust between abstract and concrete advice depending on the entrepreneur's gender. In contrast, male mentors generally provide more abstract advice and show little variation in their communication style based on the entrepreneur's gender.

Gendered expectations shape communication

This isn't necessarily intentional. The study found that gender stereotypes, beliefs about what traits are "desirable" for entrepreneurs, play a big role. When asking mentors about what traits they expect to see on female and male entrepreneurs, female entrepreneurs were expected to embody both masculine (e.g., assertive, ambitious) and feminine (e.g., empathetic, collaborative) traits. Male entrepreneurs? They are expected to embody just the "masculine" ones.

Why does this matter?

The difference in advice style isn't just academic. It shapes something deeply personal, the entrepreneur's belief in their own ability to succeed. The study suggests that when female entrepreneurs are consistently fed step-by-step guidance instead of visionary thinking, it can limit them, affecting their autonomy, creativity, and confidence in leading their ventures.

In her TED Talk "Teach girls bravery, not perfection"ⁱ, Reshma Saujani, founder of Girls Who Code, highlights how women are often advised to follow rules and execute precisely, rather than to think big, while boys are advised the opposite. This narrative also shows up in mentoring relationships where women are more likely to receive concrete advice.

Key takeaways

The mentoring playbook needs to be rewritten, and the takeaway is that mentors need to be more conscious of how they communicate, and to whom. Mentors should be trained to know how to balance their communication between abstract and concrete. Abstract advice should not be given only to some entrepreneurs, and concrete advice should be given when clear guidance is needed. For entrepreneurship ecosystems to thrive equitably, mentoring must evolve beyond gendered defaults. This study invites us to shift our lens: from how often we mentor to how we mentor. It's time to empower all entrepreneurs not just to follow steps, but to dream big and make their dreams come true.

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ⁱSaujani, R. (2016, February). *Teach girls bravery, not perfection* [Video].

TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/reshma_saujani_teach_girls_bravery_not_perfection