

IN HER OWN WORDS

STEP UP! Words for Women's Equity

By Michelle Casali, intern at the Women's Center at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

My pivotal essay on "What do you want to be when you grow up?" has developed over the years, running from tap dancer to teacher, from clown to counselor.

In second grade, my essays stemmed from a desire to be the first woman anything: the first woman president, the first woman in the NBA, the first woman pope.

I had extremely limited interest in political leadership, sports or religion, but in second grade, "girls rule, boys drool" wasn't just a snappy comeback—it was a lifestyle. I dreamed of taking over the world and couldn't understand why women hadn't already done it.

I figured they must not have had my second grade wisdom or street smarts, so it was up to me to crack the glass ceiling once I grew up.

My early beliefs about women's power in the world becomes incredibly idealistic when juxtaposed with statistics about the areas where women are still not represented. If women represent roughly 50% of the world, it is unacceptable that we are still tremendously underrepresented across fields. Hence the need for a workshop on equity.

Why 'you guys' is a feminist issue

I co-designed and co-led a workshop called STEP UP! Allies for Women's Equity. Within the first hour, we presented a mini-lecture on language. Mainly addressing the male generic, such as the use of "you guys" to refer to both genders, the mini-lecture also asked participants to discuss the use of the term "ladies," the difference between using "girls" and "women," and how our words affect the larger environment.

It's tricky to excise male generics from everyday use. "You guys" seems to be the accepted go-to phrase when referring to a large group, and "oh man" is considered a polite expression of frustration when compared to more colorful alternatives.

While these interjections seem harmless, they support the male generic. These words make men the standard in language, leaving women invisible.

At first I resisted this idea. It seemed too sensitive to politically correct ideas for my style, but when I considered how statistically underrepresented women are, I figured we could at the very least work toward equal representation in language.

Females are underrepresented in politics, athletics, math and science, earnings and administrative positions. Changing individual language from "you guys" to "you all" takes seconds, and yet it can suddenly create equal representation with minimal effort.

If we can recognize how language shapes our reality, then we can accept the first steps we must make toward achieving equality in our very own conversations.



Michelle Casali

How to STEP UP!

One of the first steps to empowerment is learning how to ask for what you want. Change won't occur unless we can visualize what that change can be. To give the participants of our workshop an opportunity to be change agents, we introduced the STEP UP! model of communication.

It follows five easy steps for asking someone to make a change, whether that be a change of language, change of behavior or change of action. It looks like this:

**S: See.** What do I see happening? This step requires one to name the behavior or words she would like to see changed.

*Example:* "I notice you often refer to me as "little lady."

**T: Thought.** What do I think about it? Participants provide their thoughts or opinions about what they saw. *Example:* "I think the term "little lady" is demeaning."

**E: Emotion.** What do I feel about it? After providing an opinion, participants include what they felt. *Example:* "I feel angry when I hear you call me that."

**P: Prefer.** What would I prefer you to do about it? To make a change, ask for a change. Participants must explicitly give a preference for what they would like to happen next. *Example:* "I would prefer if you no longer called me "little lady" or any other patronizing terms. I would prefer if you used my name instead."

**UP: Up the ante!** What will you do if your preferences aren't met? If necessary, add a consequence. This is an optional step, not always needed. *Example:* "If you choose to continue calling me by unprofessional nicknames, I will consider the workplace a hostile environment and arrange a meeting with someone from human resources."

Keep in mind in using this model

• **Make eye contact,** speak firmly and use appropriate gestures when speaking. If the majority of our interpersonal conversations are non-verbal, project as confidently as you can—through not just your words but your body as well.

• **There is no guarantee** that it will make a change. Assertive communication such as this can be more effective than no communication at all, but it isn't perfect.

• **Ask for only one change at a time.** Follow the plan of "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." Demands are more likely to be met if they're manageable.

• **There are consequences for action,** as well as consequences for inaction. How will you make a difference by speaking up? How will anything change if you don't speak up?

I invite you to use this model in your own individual work toward equity. Change takes time, but it also takes commitment. I encourage you to STEP UP! where and when you have the chance.

While these micro-steps may not change the world immediately, they will have an impact.

At least they may expand the breadth of choices for the "What do you want to be when you grow up?" essays of future generations of second-grade dreamers. ■

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