

Make your Presence Felt: why do women flounder in high level meetings?

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This article appeared in THE GLOSS Irish Times Magazine in October 2014

According to recent article in the Harvard Business Review, senior female executives are failing to “assert themselves in high-level meetings”. Their voices are “ignored or drowned out”, they “struggle to find a way into the conversation” and are “uncomfortable with conflict”. When a high ranking subgroup of the 1100 women surveyed were asked what men could do about it, 38% said men should “ask us direct questions” and “bring us into the discussion.” More startling to me than the passivity of such ladies-in waiting style responses is the fact that *any* high-ranking woman would consider ceding responsibility and control to anyone else. Since “senior female executives” are neither children nor an endangered species, why should they receive special treatment? My problem with these kind of disempowering narratives about women and work – so often written by women – is that they foster a victim psychology, undermine confidence, encourage a level of introspection that is counter-productive and reinforce the view that workplace problems are gender-specific.

During a 15-year career in investment banking I managed a multi-national team of men around the world - I did the 360° reviews, negotiated their promotions and bonuses and I want to make a simple but important observation: men *also* agonise over their performance in high-level meetings. And no wonder, since this is where careers are fast-tracked. Those who want to get ahead will seize any opportunity for face-time with senior management. A single meeting gives you the opportunity to establish yourself as a smart and effective analytical thinker who can identify opportunity, solve problems, handle conflict, build consensus, shift opposition and negotiate your way out of a black hole. When I became the first woman Managing Director on the trading floor at Morgan Stanley, my revenue production was a key factor, but I can unequivocally say that my performance at internal and external high-level meetings was crucial to sealing the deal.

In my experience in finance and, more recently, in academia and arts, those who speak up are the men and women who are prepared to take risk. Every time you open your mouth in a high-level meeting you advance or stall your career progression. If you opt to be a silent witness or consistently fail to contribute effectively, you must accept that this is likely to severely constrain your upward mobility. You might also ask yourself why you are in the meeting if you are not prepared to speak. As Mark Twain quipped: “There are 2 types of speakers: those who are nervous and those who are liars.” Why not accept that it’s normal to be nervous and commit to master the performance through preparation and practice?

Love the fear

Performance anxiety is a natural response to pressure – whether it’s taking a penalty shot or making an unscripted speech. You are not *supposed* to feel comfortable! The best advice I’ve ever had about managing performance is from athletes who understand both the physiology of the stress response and the strategies for

developing mental toughness. Sweaty palms, elevated heart rate, nausea etc. are your body's automatic response to a situation that puts you on alert. This "fight or flight" adrenaline rush mobilizes and energizes you to cope with the challenge. The trick is to embrace the pressure and transform your anxiety into positive energy.

Positive visualization

Imagine success. The footballer pictures the ball in the back of the net, so imagine you putting in a great performance. Picture yourself leaving the meeting room after doing a great job and savour that moment. Conviction is a key ingredient in building the confidence necessary to successful preparation and execution. You must believe!

Learn how to breathe

Master the art of abdominal breathing – it's a sure-fire way to remain calm under pressure and a life-skill that should be taught to kids at school. Study the technique on the Internet and practice the deep inhale / long slow exhale.

Forget about yourself

"Happiness is loss of self-consciousness," wrote the writer-analyst Adam Phillips. We are happiest when we are absorbed in a task instead of thinking about ourselves. So focus on *content* and *delivery*. This is how you learn to enjoy the preparation and begin to look forward to the occasion.

Stop being a woman

At a talk with Eliza Manningham-Buller, former head of MI5 (now the chair of council of the Imperial College where I teach) she replied to a question about her experience as woman in a male-dominated profession: "I never thought about it." All of the successful women I have met – in finance, law, science, law enforcement, engineering, advertising, arts, - have one characteristic in common: they are busy getting on with the job. Defining yourself around gender lines conditions your thinking and can lead to dangerous presumptions. If your work environment is predominantly male, pause to consider the simple advantage of visibility. "You're so lucky," a male colleague in banking once wistfully remarked to me, "every time you walk into a meeting you get noticed. I'm just another suit."

Focus on the task in hand and think about what's on the table. What's the agenda? What's the deliverable - a decision or a plan? Why are you there? What have you got to say? Are you expected to speak or is it optional? What does the team /organization need /expect from you? Do you have specialist knowledge/experience?

Once you've nailed your content you figure out how to deliver it.

Ditch the script

Prepare to speak without notes. Speaking unscripted is essential - it shows you are on top of your subject, demonstrates your confidence and - crucially - it gives you more control because you can maintain eye contact. Unscripted speakers may *appear* unrehearsed but they're not. Prepare and practice.

Be brief

One powerfully delivered key point is high-impact, so think short and sweet as an opener. You *want* to invite questions so you can hold the floor for longer. I was at a meeting last week where a theoretical physicist was challenged to explain dark matter in 30 seconds to a non-expert group. Formulate your point carefully and practice the unscripted delivery. Speak with conviction and don't repeat yourself – it's an insult to your audience's intelligence.

“Don't be an oxygen thief” was the house rule on when I worked on the trading floor – i.e. don't hog the airspace. Almost all meetings are too long and most speakers whitter on. Aim to be so compelling that no one is checking their smartphone. Stick to the point, don't fall in love with the sound of your voice and *never* go over time. Don't speak for the sake of it - anyone who is smart will see you are time wasting to snatch face time.

Where is the data?

Whenever possible use evidence, targets, results to support or dismantle a proposal. If there are headline numbers you must know them by heart.

Ask a question

Questions are your most valuable multi-purpose tool: they signal that you are an analytical processor who thinks on your feet. Use questions to kick-start a discussion, open up the floor, dismantle an argument or deflect a criticism.

Turn up the volume

There are few things more frustrating than straining to hear someone, so respect your audience. It is absolutely essential that you are audible. Here's some advice from a singer about voice projection: When you're tense you tighten the jaw and draw in the chin – the mouth cavity is reduced, the airwaves constrict and your voice becomes small and nasal. So raise your head, loosen your jaw. Experiment with holding a tennis ball between your teeth – you'll be astonished to discover just how far your jaw can stretch!

Adjust your voice to room size. In a crowded room, step forward or stand up. Pace yourself. Don't spurt - speaking too fast or in staccato leads to lack of clarity and coherence.

Embrace conflict

Dissent is essential to healthy debate, so get comfortable with conflict – it's better to draw out the opposition so you know their beef. Be prepared to fall out - your job is to be effective not popular.

Confrontational statements are more likely to antagonize/alienate e.g: “You're wrong. /That won't work.” Master the art of constructive disagreement by finding the words to disarm with style, e.g. “I take your point about X, but I see a real problem with ...”

Don't take disagreement personally. Differentiate between content and delivery. Icy poise is always more effective than anger - lose your head and you lose credibility. Remain calm under fire. Best weapon: breathing.

Learn the language

“If I catch that client short-selling ahead of one of our deals I will personally rip out his asshole.” This was the first sentence addressed to me in my inaugural meeting with the new Divisional Head when I was a rookie. This wasn’t unusual language for a trading floor — but what I heard in the warning was his fear - of a hedge fund client running amok and a business risk that was not being managed. And there lay opportunity – if I could tame the client I would succeed where others had failed. Language is culture-specific and it establishes you an insider, so listen carefully to the house style. When I moved from finance to the arts and academia, one of the most difficult challenges was adjusting my communication style. What was effective in a fast-moving bottom-line focused business was sometimes perceived as abrupt and alienating in a different environment.

Listen and watch

In a room full of people jockeying for face time, attentive listening is key. If you’re fretting about your own performance you’ll miss crucial detail and pass up the opportunity to ask questions and gather intel. Look around the room and observe the strategic alliances. Who is bored? Who is impressed? Studying the responses to other speakers gives you a good benchmark.

Check your eyewear

Continual removal of reading glasses is distracting for an audience and enfeebles the speaker, so make the switch to lenses or varifocals.

Hands, nails and jewelry are on show when you speak - they *will* get noticed. Don’t wear anything that jangle in a midair gesture or clunks on a tabletop.

Arrive early, sit clever

The pre-meeting warm-up allows you to take the pulse. Depending on what’s on the agenda, and what’s at stake, seek out contact with appropriate colleagues in the days before the meeting. Find an opportunity for an informal chat - impromptu face-to-face contact is powerful in the email age – it’s also unrecorded.

Early birds also get to choose their seat. Don’t travel in a pack / sit beside your mates. Don’t be a wallflower and don’t form a woman cluster. Sheryl Sandberg in her book “Lean In” tells a good story about senior women from the Fed huddling round a side table during coffee break. Aim to sit within the power orbit if you want management to notice you. Junior people keep their distance, seniors and aspirants sit close to the sun.

Leave late

Fates are sealed and decisions made at the after-meeting, so don’t rush for the exit. Linger to observe how the power cluster dissolves into sub groups on the inside track. This is your chance to gather intel and forge alliances. It is also the time when you might receive positive feedback from people who otherwise rarely see you. Master the art of confident introduction and take the opportunity to get to know someone new.

Get over it

After-meeting brooding is a waste of energy. Figure out what went wrong: content? delivery? Failure to manage the noise? Own your mistakes without being destroyed

by them. The overwhelming chance is that your screw-up seems much bigger to you than to everyone else. Recovery means learning from the experience. If you feel you've promised something you can't deliver or been too heavy-handed with someone, manage the consequences. Make a decision about damage limitation and act on it. Back track gracefully and confidently and don't let it fester.

Score yourself

Give yourself marks out of 10 after each meeting so you know what to work on. This takes one honest minute. If you have a colleague you trust to give you an objective review, ask for it.