

The smart woman's guide to being heard at work

Research shows that women are often more backwards at coming forwards in the workplace than their male counterparts CREDIT: GETTY

By **Marina Gask**

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Prefacing your best shot in a high-powered meeting with, ‘This is probably really rubbish, and sorry if it is, but what do we all think about...’ would not, I’m convinced, be anyone’s career high point. But this was me, presenting a cherished idea to the board of the company where I worked 12 years ago, having sat for 10 stressful minutes waiting for my moment. Inwardly, I cringed.

A journalist for many years and a three-time magazine editor, I should have known better than to apologise for anything I had to say in [meetings](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/connect/small-business/talent-culture-leadership/how-to-make-meetings-more-valuable/). It was the kind of self-effacing behaviour for which I was always scolding [junior staffers](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/work/problem-millennials-workplace/). And yet apologetic preambles were my default among senior colleagues. That is, when I wasn’t lobbing opinions across the table in joke form, thus undermining every word. Here I was, a confident woman bursting with ideas, unable to articulate them when it counted. And it turns out that workplace communication is a struggle for far too many of us.

Recent research reveals that women are 68 per cent more likely than men to say they never feel comfortable when expressing themselves in a work environment. The study, conducted by Rada in Business, also found that women struggled most in board meetings, one-to-ones with their boss and meetings with senior management.

If there was any doubt that [gender equality](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/gender-inequality-goes-pop-brit-awards-showcase-songwritings/) in the workplace is still an issue, it shot back on to the news agenda last summer, when it was revealed that two-thirds of the BBC’s top earners were men. Then, last October, the European Institute for Gender Equality published the Gender Equality Index 2017, which showed that gender equality at work has hardly improved in a decade.

This disparity, it seems, has left us struggling to find our voice. ‘I used to go red in client meetings,’ says Lucy Hodgson, 41, director of The Great Recruitment Company, whose clients are predominantly male partners in accountancy firms. ‘I’d find the men talking among themselves about golf or football. I found myself worrying that they wouldn’t care what I had to say. In spite of my track record, I’d blush and struggle to speak.’

“When I stopped worrying about what people would think of what I had to say and just said it, I was much better received”

Leadership communications coach Antoinette Dale Henderson, author of *Leading With Gravitas*, says many of her female clients find that incidents in life where they were [belittled](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/06/kate-humble-rural-people-belittled-modern-society/) publicly are at the root of their work behaviour. ‘Through these experiences we receive a powerful message at the deepest subconscious level that it’s unsafe to put your head above the parapet. So when we are asked to share our opinion in a meeting, it affects our behaviour.’

Internalising these beliefs means we can become super-sensitive to negativity and wary of putting ourselves out there, leaving us on the back foot. ‘Instead of speaking clearly, some women find themselves either cracking a joke, over-dramatising their point, or shutting down altogether,’ says Antoinette. ‘None of these behaviours serve them well.’ Of course, what doesn’t help is being brought up to believe that overt confidence isn’t welcome. In a typical Western home, traditionally girls have been encouraged to be kind and inclusive.

‘We’re wired to seek acceptance,’ says Dr Lynda Shaw, cognitive neuroscientist, business psychologist and author of *Your Brain Is Boss*. ‘We need that feeling of being part of a tribe. People can put us down very easily by not including us and that in turn impacts on our confidence.’

For Rania Robinson, 46, managing director of advertising agency Quiet Storm, it’s conferences that she finds challenging. ‘I’m comfortable presenting to a group, but I lack confidence to speak up in wider forums,’ she says. ‘I worry about saying something stupid. For me, the difficulty is in speaking in front of strong women – not men.’

Women are paid less than men who do the same jobs

% pay gap for full-time workers in different occupations



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Sheryl Marjoram, 49, managing director at advertising agency McCann London, struggled with imposter syndrome for many years. ‘My lack of formal education – unlike my colleagues, who were Oxbridge graduates (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/02/21/oxbridges-posh-kids-like-hide-behind-working-class-smokescreen/>) – left me with a huge chip on my shoulder. In meetings I would preface everything with “I hope you don’t mind...” or “Sorry, but...” – adding heaps of affectation before making a point that was just as impressive as whatever other people had to say.’

We know that adopting a powerful pose and making eye contact is crucial in assertive communication, but perhaps more important, says Antoinette, is getting your head in the right place. Then all your expertise will kick in and your words will flow. For this she recommends the OPRAHS method: asking yourself what’s my Objective? What’s my Purpose? What’s my Role? What’s my Attitude? What do I want to Hear, and then what do I want to Say?

‘You can ask yourself those questions as you’re walking to the meeting room. This will give you certainty so you can make a clear statement without preamble.’ The trick, she adds, is to use short pauses between statements, but not long enough for someone to butt in, and to keep it brief and concise.

Sheryl says: ‘Now I own my beliefs. I know that if I’m thinking it then somebody else is – so I just go for it.’ And remember (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/how-to-improve-your-memory-never-forget-anything/>), just because faces aren’t showing assent doesn’t mean everyone thinks you’re talking rubbish. ‘When I stopped worrying about what people would think of what I had to say and just said it, I was much better received,’ Lucy adds

Besides, you don’t need your colleagues to be your friends, says Dr Shaw: ‘You want to be seen as efficient, effective and easy to work with – not “nice”. So don’t be afraid to say what needs to be said. Assertively.’

Six ways to speak up

- 1 Be kind to yourself** ‘If what you say to yourself is negative, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy,’ says Antoinette. ‘So tell yourself, “I’m prepared, I have a right to be in this room, and what I’m about to say is valuable.” This will boost your confidence and give energy to what you say.’
- 2 Breathe deeply** To conquer nerves (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/ski/advice/top-tips-for-nervous-skiers/>) and do justice to your ideas, breathe low and slow from the diaphragm, says Abi Eniola, a Rada in Business tutor. ‘This way, you breathe into the parasympathetic nervous system, releasing the body from tension and threat, so you have the time to respond well when met with a challenging conversation.’
- 3 Take up more space** ‘The way we occupy space with our bodies says so much about our self-belief and our place in the workplace,’ says Abi. ‘Changing stance fires neurons in the brain, which affects thought patterns, the way we feel and in turn our outcomes.’ Plant your feet on the floor and ground yourself, stand up to your full height and lengthen the spine. Allow your shoulder blades to open out and drop your shoulders into an open, neutral position. If you’re sitting, ‘sit straight and

symmetrically, with your hands on the table,' adds Antoinette.

- 4 **Use a virtual library** Before going into a difficult meeting, visualise and 'replay' highlights from your career, like the time you led a successful project. 'Focusing on you at your most successful helps you to project confidence,' says Antoinette. Take a cue from actors and sports stars and create a ritual that has an association with feeling capable and in control, to help you recapture that confidence.
- 5 **Conquer verbal tics** Make your statements without apology, preamble or disclaimers, using the rule of three to stay concise. Antoinette advises: 'By saying, "There are three points I want to make. The first is... The second is... And finally..." you're stopping people from interrupting you, while encouraging your brain to be brief.'
- 6 **Monitor your voice** Under stress our voice tends to get higher pitched, which can make us come across as shrill or insecure. 'Be aware of this, and try to lower your voice at the end of a sentence,' says Antoinette. 'A lowered voice says, "I'm not asking you, I am telling you."'

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