

The Good News about Being a Woman Speaker:

## How So-Called “Feminine Traits” Translate into Speaker Strengths

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### Listen up. This presentation will change your life.

No doubt about it: in order to be successful at work, or in a community leadership role, women must master presentation skills. Women today don't just want a level playing field or a seat at the table: they want to be at the head of the table and at the microphone. As we move into occupational and professional roles formerly occupied by men only, as we seek to break that glass ceiling and move into top decision making roles in all facets of life, we need to find our “public voice.”

But the “fear of public speaking” research doesn't address the fact that, historically, public speaking is a function of the male role, and it's likely even more anxiety inducing for women speakers. We expect to see men at the podium or facing the press but it's not “women's place.” Telling people what to do and how to do it, how to spend their money, and whom they should vote for (or not) is still a relatively new posture for girls and women.

The good news is that women speakers don't need to mimic men but, rather, can capitalize on the very “feminine” traits that society has devalued for centuries. Many of those same traits are speaker strengths.

Let's be clear: “feminine” behaviors such as “batting your eyelashes,” being coy and evasive, are mainly a media invention. That's not what we're addressing here.

Those communication behaviors are dated and certainly don't help capable, competent, and motivated women to succeed in business or the professions. On the other hand, a cluster of feminine traits that sociologists indicate as a preference for “sociability” can certainly empower women speakers.

Effective public speaking requires that the speaker is also relating to listeners: empathizing, making connections, solving problems, sharing experiences, and finding common ground.

**Ask yourself:** Do you capitalize on a range of “feminine traits” that can help you to be effective at the podium? Take this self-assessment quiz to find out.

**Reflect on your presentation style.** Which of these statements describes you?

1. I enjoy talking with
2. I am willing to share personal anecdotes and disclose personal information if it will help me to make a point.
3. I do worry about what other people think.
4. I do like to find out what I have in common with people with or to whom I'm speaking.



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5. I think about consequences of decisions, and how they might impact other people.
6. I appreciate the practical details of everyday life and how things happen.
7. I prefer to empower other people rather than taking credit for knowing it all.
8. I make things happen through my relationships with people, not (necessarily) through status, position, or power.

**SCORING:** Give yourself one point for each statement to assess whether you are able to integrate what have been described as “feminine” attributes into your presentations.

0-2 Seek opportunities to be whom you are when speaking to groups and audiences. Start by volunteering to be on a panel, speaking to a group of people with whom you are familiar so you can experiment with a “relational” approach.

3-5 When you tackle a problem or propose a solution, you’re confident at the podium, expressing feelings, disclosing relevant information, and relating to people in a personal way that makes you able to connect.

6-8 Congratulations! Your presentation style effectively incorporates feminine traits; your presentations are thoughtful, you relate to people, and you can personalize dry material. You have the potential to be a leader who can influence others to think differently and take action regarding the extraordinary range of issues facing us as a society. Time to meet the media!

## Are my conversational skills an advantage at the podium?

Women know how to keep a conversation going, using segues that bridge from one topic to another with a “That reminds me of ....” and “Has this ever happened to you?” If you can bring that same “impromptu” style to a prepared remarks, people are sure to think “Now that’s someone I’d like to get to know better.” Women appreciate the give-and-take of informal conversation. Perhaps this preference for interaction is why women do so well during the Q and A phase, after delivering their prepared remarks.



Even more than the desire to convey information, a speaker with a feminine style wants to build a trusting relationship with her audience. Using her notes only as a reference point, she will be more likely to make eye contact with individuals in the audience, one key point at a time. Besides the “feel good” aspect, listeners tend to remember what is said when the speaker is looking directly at them as she makes her point, rather than reading from a prepared script.

The late President Ronald Reagan was lauded for his delivery skills and conversational tone. We later learned that a woman, Peggy Noonan, wrote many of Reagan's most outstanding speeches. Her words empowered Reagan with a feminine style that conveyed empathy and caring.

## Am I being strategic – or self-indulgent – when sharing personal anecdotes?

Women disclose what they know.

Hoarding information? No way? That's a man's game. Whether you just discovered a new outlet for designer shoes, the best interest rate for first-time homebuyers, or the cure for cancer, you like to share what you know. It's what women do.

Women have grab bag of personal stories they can use to make an otherwise dry subject come alive for an audience. What better way to get to know a leader than through the personal examples she provides? Former Governor Ann Richards has admitted that the years after her divorce were a time when, "I smoked like a chimney and drank like a fish." Through self-deprecating humor, she makes it clear that this destructive time in her life is behind her; she went public with this situation before the press used it to destroy her credibility. Being candid about one's imperfections makes the audience trust the speaker is real, someone who is "just like us."

## Can my relationship skills help me get my message across?

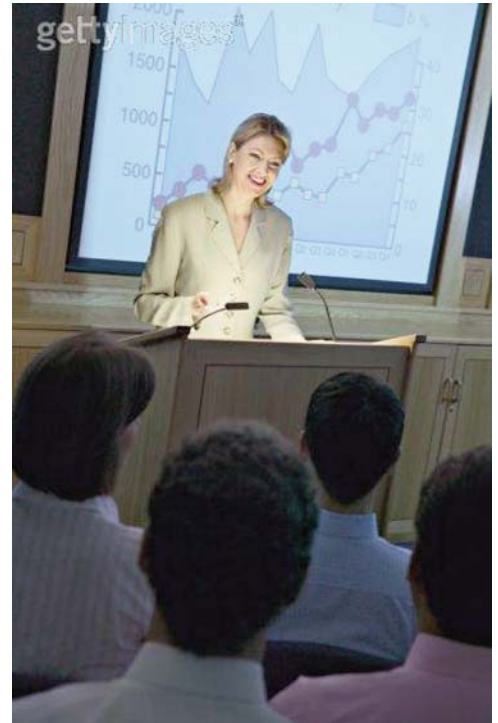
Political speakers pay media coaches big bucks to learn how to "stay on message," but this is more important to women is whether their message is relevant and make sense to their listeners. Women may sometimes worry about what other people think, but isn't that a good strategy for any speaker. From research I've learned that women speakers are more likely to have done some detective work beforehand to learn about the audience's problems and challenges, values, interests, needs, perspective and sophistication.

That understanding becomes the basis for how they frame their remarks.

For example, as a Hispanic woman, television producer Christina Saralegui can relate to the the cultural ethos of modesty, she sensitively frames her commentaries about breast cancer and gay issues in ways that are more likely to get people involved. As a Hispanic woman, Saralegui wants to build bridges between generations and cultures. She can relate to the ethos of "modesty when she provides commentaries about the topics of breast cancer and gay issues, explaining "We're all parents and we have the same problems. I try to appeal to the common denominator.... everyone is in this together."

## What do I have in common with my listeners?

In 1985, the groundbreaking book "In Search of Excellence" pointed out that the best managers walk around the office and find out what people are thinking and feeling. No big news to women; we've always operated that way. Women are used to discussing problems with women friends and/or family in order to learn, strategize, and share resources. Everyone has been a member of a family, worked, been to school, paid taxes. Women speakers seek to find common ground and help their audiences learn from experience. As former Governor Ann Richards said, "Explain the issues in language your mama can understand," and people will pay attention.



## **Are the practical details of everyday life important to my listeners?**

Since women speakers of diverse backgrounds share a perspective that lies outside of “the establishment” (historically populated by white males), they can draw attention to real life situations that are often ignored. Women tend to become advocates for change in areas that directly affect their everyday lives. It’s not just health care; it’s a question of “How can my mother—and yours—pay for her prescription drugs on a fixed income?” It’s not just the issue of affordable housing, it’s “How can we qualify for our first homeowners’ loans?” Women’s lives are expanding by involvement in new domains of responsibility and authority. It may be time to question the ways that things were always done, or that the assumptions that had been made before policies were crafted. If women speakers don’t challenge the establishment in terms of how policy issues affect women’s daily lives, , who will?

## **Can my relationship skills help me to gain credibility as a leader - i.e., as “the voice of authority?”**

Good speakers aren't aloof. They know how to build relationships with the audience before and during the presentation. At the podium, Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole share anecdotes about people they've met that illuminate how policy and legislative decisions play out in everyday life. Hillary talks about her mother's experience growing up unloved and poor, and how she, in turn, became committed to improving the foster care system. Liz Dole walks the room “Oprah style” and gets up close and personal.

Oprah Winfrey has talked publicly and written about how we “stand on the shoulders of those who came before us.” Thanking your staff and giving credit to any others who helped you make it to the podium sends the message that you work well with and through others.

A dynamic presenter who is open and accessible need make no apologies for using the podium to build new relationships with like-minded people who will hopefully come up afterwards and ask, “I liked the way you presented your case. Where do I sign up?” Feminine attributes and qualities such as relating, disclosing, and caring—coupled with an outsider’s point of view—ensure that dynamic women speakers will be seen, heard, and remembered.



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Lois Phillips is co-author of “Women Seen and Heard: Lessons Learned from Successful Speakers,” with Anita Perez Ferguson; this article is excerpted from their book, which is available at all bookstores or online. Luz Publications, Pub. January 2004, or contact the authors at [womenseenandheard@yahoo.com](mailto:womenseenandheard@yahoo.com)

