

Women seen and heard: Speaking with a strategic vision

By Lois Phillips, Ph.D.

Excerpted and adapted from Women Seen and Heard: Lessons Learned from Successful Speakers by Lois Phillips, Ph.D., and Anita Perez Ferguson, M.A. (Luz Publications: 2004)

According to Catalyst, the premier research source regarding women's advancement into top management roles, stereotyping of women remains a problem, particularly with regard to women's capacity to communicate about and solve problems as well as men do. So, if you are a woman or are helping women advance do this exercise:

Imagine yourself at the front of a vast auditorium, about to begin your presentation describing a technology advance. You know your stuff, and want to bring people together to increase mutual success. But the audience may wonder if they should take you seriously. Although you are the epitome of cool, you are still up against the stereotype of woman as illogical, emotional, and details oriented. How do you prepare yourself to deliver your message so it makes an impact?

The truth is that even when women achieve position and status, women speakers need to gain credibility before they are believed. The voice of authority has historically been and remains a male voice; think John Wayne, Lee Iacocca, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. Men start with credibility as leaders; women have to earn it.

The audience needs to realize that it is no accident you are standing in front of them. You have advanced yourself and your company en route to the podium. As

women move into roles and occupations formerly occupied by men only, women need to be aware of the unique position they are in. Even more important than knowing your topic, your overarching message to the audience must be:

"I am a capable, competent leader and dynamic speaker. I am going to give you the gift of my wisdom. In fact, this presentation may change your life!"

Persuasive speaking skills are critical to a businesswoman's success. For example,

entrepreneurs need to get private equity banking which means speaking to venture capitalists and making the pitch. Executives need to motivate teams to work smarter, not harder. Top executives are in charge of change and that requires that they become dynamic speakers. The anecdotes presented must be on

point, the examples must dramatize the need for change, and the information must be presented with a view from the top, looking out at the horizon. A woman's speaking style must reflect a strategic perspective if she is to be seen, heard, trusted, and remembered as a leader.

It is possible to deliver your message in a more assertive style without giving up



women's more "feminine" sensibilities, commonly thought to be empathy, compassion, and a collaborative approach to life. Successful speakers have good advice for you:

1. Dare to be bold.
2. Develop strong communication skills.
3. Keep your eye on the big picture.
4. Present your scenarios in terms of human consequences.

Dare To Be Bold

Being assertive is a requisite for being a leader: it comes with the territory.

Nothing "virtual" about it. Telling people what they should do or how they might think about something is a new role for women who have been programmed by convention to smile and be pleasant, defer to men, and avoid stirring up disagreements, particularly in public. Being bold and outspoken is difficult if you had few role models and you were encouraged to be "seen and not heard" by parents, teachers, friends, religious teachings, and the media. Think back to your early years and give yourself one point for each true statement below:

Self-assessment Quiz:

People in my family would solicit my opinion or ask me what I thought.

- People told me that I was worth listening to.
- I watched movies or read books about women in unconventional roles.
- Friends and co-workers usually ask me to lead our group or team.
- People often quote me, repeating a catchy phrase, interesting fact, or meaningful anecdote.

Scoring:

- Score of 1: It's important to find positive role models who are dynamic presenters. Notice how they organize their ideas and their presentation style to be effective, and try their techniques. Volunteer to be on a panel, or make a presentation at a staff meeting. Find people who encourage you to develop these skills and who will give you a pat on the back and helpful feedback.
- Score of 2 or 3: You have the potential to develop into a dynamic speaker. You are in a position to imagine yourself in roles that require you to motivate people to change.
- Score of 4 or 5: You have a track record for effectively using your presentation skills and personal style to advance yourself and your organization to a whole other level.



Develop Strong Communication Skills

Public speaking has almost always been structured as a monologue, not a dialogue. The audiences' eyes and ears focus on the speaker, who is expected to have a strong personality and point of view. Women tend to be more conversational and less authoritative in their delivery of facts and a story. They want to relate, are interested in how others feel, and seek common ground. These are admirable qualities in intimate gatherings and useful in presentations, but being a public speaker or leader requires a more assertive communication style. At the podium, your commitment to your vision must trump any tendencies to be deferential.

Women in technology industries have barriers to break; research tells us that women aren't reaching the executive level in technology any more easily than they have in more traditional industries. A University of Pennsylvania study found that women make up 9 percent of executives at telecom, media and Internet companies, lower than the 13 percent average for all companies. This statistic is unfortunate because women bring a new perspective to the business world that could develop a more diverse customer base for products waiting to be designed.

If unrewarded, women become discouraged and frustrated and leave corporations to start their own businesses where they are assured greater likelihood of success. In fact, the number of woman-owned firms has grown by 28% in the past seven years, three times the growth rate among all employer firms, and women now control about half of all the small businesses in America. As women move up in technology fields, they are not only going to be starting companies but also providing new opportunities to other women seeking top positions.

Here are **seven** techniques that will help you take charge and stay focused.

1. Be Direct

If you propose action, be direct about your proposal in a way that is easy for everyone to understand. For example:

What we need to do now is If not, there are going to be three predictable consequences. They are...

2. Be Logical

When you present arguments, use logic and stay focused on your topic. For example:

When our industry analyzes the impact of practices that produce pollution, we must

consider the quality of our air and water, and toxics in our soil, particularly if we want to show our business partners that we can be good citizens.

3. Be Specific

Avoid generalizations. Be specific about your expertise and concretize your success. This can be difficult for those of us who want to avoid bragging. For example:

I've spent ten years in the field working with over 300 corporate clients as well as computer science researchers and graduate students, and I have learned five lessons that saved our company millions. They are...

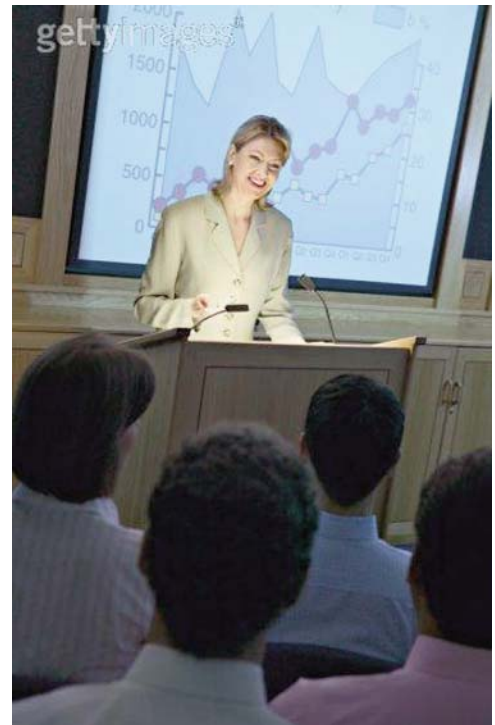
4. Don't Disclose Too Much

When you present an emotional story, make sure you aren't venting, blaming, or playing the victim. Use just the right amount of self-disclosure, not so much that you become self-indulgent or sink to self-deprecating humor. Be brief and frame the story in such a way that you are making a specific point. For example:

I am a cancer survivor. At first, I was devastated by the news. While I certainly wouldn't recommend choosing to have cancer, ironically I feel that I'm a better person and have a richer life as a result. I'm even a better manager. Today I'll share three lessons I've learned from surviving cancer that apply to ensuring that our company survives and thrives.

5. Collect Facts. Use Facts

Research and refer to the most current and accurate facts to back up your opinion. You can have a lot of legitimate feelings and great stories to tell about your



subject, but without the facts to support them, you'll probably lose your audience.

For example:

We need to understand how California economics are affecting our bottom line. When I first traveled out of our cocoon in Silicon Valley to visit urban schools and colleges, I was shocked to realize that only 2% of all students own computers and - *most of them do not own ours.*

6. Keep Your Eye on The Big Picture

Leaders focus on the big picture and don't get mired in the details. Leaders are futurists who can mastermind big changes. What's the biggest problem in the industry? They'll take it on. For example, Cynthia Dwork, a senior researcher at Microsoft, has tackled the problem of spam because her company has a major financial stake in its elimination. She sees it as a puzzle worth solving, predictably satisfying grateful customers and creating more profit for her company.¹

To make sure that you are seen as a big-picture thinker, your presentation must begin with a statement of your vision and then an action plan with specific steps for the implementation phase. Approach the big picture with big questions. Ask yourself:

- What is the ideal future scenario I see for this particular challenge or problem?
- Why is my vision and action plan a win-win solution? What are the benefits and who benefits?
- What are the broad general strategies that will allow us to realize this vision together?

- What must I do to ensure that we achieve this vision?

Now get specific and build your action plan:

1. Outline your speech point-by-point and remember to explicitly list your main points in advance of your explanations and provide examples for each.
2. Move forward in a logical manner, one step at a time. Build on each successive idea.
3. For each point, use transition words such as "First...," "Second...," and "Third," so it is easy to follow you.
4. Prevent taking impulsive tangents when you speak. You're driving the train so stay on track. Look ahead and carry your listeners along with you.



7. Present Your Scenarios In Terms Of Human Consequences

In this post-Enron world, people appreciate knowing that while all decisions have risks, you have thought through possible consequences. Can you walk the audience through the implications for groups, teams, departments, and individuals? This is where your conversational skills will be useful. Each customer has a story. Give those statistics a human face. Present the best and worst case scenario. People can be surprisingly flexible if leaders are straight with them about bad news. Budget cuts, moving the facility, merging, acquiring, or even downsizing are better discussed from the podium than the

water-cooler. Motivational presentations can align our listeners around a compelling vision of the future such that they are willing to accept short-term pain for long term gain.

Whether providing solutions to problems or finding a cure for spam, women may not have been encouraged to speak up in the past but this is a brave new world, one that requires participation in the debates and discussions that matter most. Women managers have years of experience and insights to share. Ask yourself: Do you want to play a role in shaping the future of technology? If you do, you'll need to develop your public voice.

Consider this: your good ideas could build a business as well as improve the local economy and, ultimately, change the world. All great ideas had to overcome profound skepticism but at least they had greater likelihood of a public hearing if they came from a man's mind, pen, hand, or mouth. Women's great ideas were more typically shared in diaries, letters, or private conversation, but today, women speakers have a range of opportunities to be a force for change. E-mail may be tempting but leaders require face-time whenever a choice point occurs. As the speaker with a strategic vision, you will be seen, heard and remembered.

Lois Phillips, Ph.D. is a management consultant and executive coach who is co-author with Anita Perez Ferguson of *Women Seen and Heard: Lessons Learned from Successful Speakers*. Published January 2004 by Luz Publications, the book is available for purchase online or at all bookstores. For conference presentations or training programs, contact the authors at lois@loisphillips.com.



¹ Johnson, Steven. "Winning the War on Spam: Digital environmentalists devise a clever strategy for bankrupting junk mail purveyors." *Discover*, June 2004.