

Break the Glass Ceiling: Effective Communication for Women in the Workplace

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Whether you believe it is nature, nurture or both that influence the behaviours and habits of women, there is no denying that women often collide with the glass ceiling in their climb up the corporate ladder. Although there is a steady rise of women who break the glass ceiling, statistics show that we still have a long way to go. Here are some common communication habits that we women (often subconsciously) fall trap to in the workplace and practical tips to overcome them:

1. Assertiveness isn't a quality that we easily inhabit

From time immemorial, women have been labelled as emotional, aggressive and irrational in the workplace. As a result, we end up going the extra mile to soften our speech. Whilst this can be helpful in negotiating empathic conversations, it simply hinders buy-in in the boardroom.

Strategy: Alterations of volume, tone and inflection can dramatically alter the results of our communication. As a petite woman, I tend to often speak with a nasal quality which results in a high pitch. By attempting to bring the voice down to the back of my throat, and push it further into the chest register, I'm able to achieve a gravitas to my communication that helps command a room.

2. We embody a meek, passive and/or submissive stance

Any effective communicator will be quick to tell you that presence is everything. Body language i.e. our physicality, stance and gestures enable people to form opinions about us before we've even opened our mouths. How frequently have you found yourself crossing your legs whilst standing, interlocking your fingers under the table whilst seated or simply hunching your shoulders in a meeting? In the workplace, these are seen as signs of weaknesses to be avoided.

Strategy: Roll your shoulders, straighten your back and lengthen your neck so your spine is erect. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart. Draw the tips of your fingers together at about waist length if standing or place

hands above the table if seated. Take a deep breath before you begin speaking. This is a proven way to master the power posture in no time.

3. We avoid silence like the plague

In the book *The Female Brain* by prominent neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine, she writes that women talk almost as three times as much as men, averaging up to 20,000 words a day. This means that we have a tendency to talk faster and use what we term in NIDA as 'filler' words – words like I mean, you know, just, like, basically, umm and aah are notable examples. Basically, what I'm trying to say, is that it ain't like going to get you a promotion, you know?

Strategy: Recognise your go-to filler words. They usually vary from person to person. Tell a trusted friend that you want to remove the filler words. Share your professional/personal brand's elevator pitch with said friend. Ask him/her to clap everytime you use filler words. Eventually, start to replace the filler words with silence. It allows your audience to process your message and lends poignancy to your communication.

4. We often lower our gaze

As women, we need to self-monitor this behaviour that is essentially a product of socialization. This can be truer for women from non-Western cultural backgrounds. By contrast, men maintain eye contact to signal authority and/or control. Learning to consciously control the musculature and/or movements of our eyes will go a long way in non-verbal communication. Our actors at NIDA spend the better portion of three years to hone it and a lifetime to master it.

Strategy: When making a presentation, ensure you aren't making eye contact with only one or two people, but spend time honouring each person in the room with adequate eye contact. Strengthen your ability to retain eye contact with members of the room over time. When in doubt, look straight ahead at the horizon. Also, remember to smile from the eyes. If you do not engage the eyes while smiling, it is said that the smile will be perceived as fake rather than authentic.

5. We undermine ourselves constantly

And, who can blame us? Media, Literature and Society have consistently sent us the message that we are there to serve the hero's narrative. In a Harvard Business Review article, leadership coach Tara Sophia Mohr highlighted a result from a report of Hewlett Packard: 'Men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them'. This filters through to women's approaches to difficult conversations regarding raises, promotions or other high-risk, high-

stakes negotiations. Women either avoid them altogether considering it to be a waste of time or sell themselves short in a persuasive negotiation.

Strategy: Try neither to position yourself as the hero nor the villain in a persuasive negotiation. Instead, centre your audience as the hero and shift your stance to that of a mentor. This will alter your own perspective, and make for more purposeful communication. As pro communication consultant Nancy Duarte tells us, 'Audience insights and resonance can only occur when a presenter takes a stance of humility'.

For more insights like this with a focus on your individual professional goals, take a look at NIDA Corporate's Influential Women (<https://www.corporate.nida.edu.au/course/CWIB>)_course. Whether you are an industry influencer, on the verge of breaking the glass ceiling or looking to up-skill yourself, this two-day course will provide you with a practical toolkit to lead with authority and authenticity in the workplace.

Happy International Women's Day!

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