



# Communication essentials for female executives to develop leadership presence: Getting beyond the barriers of understating accomplishment

Anett D. Grant <sup>a,\*</sup>, Amanda Taylor <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Executive Speaking, Inc., 60 South 6th Street, Suite 3610, Minneapolis, MN 55402, U.S.A.*

<sup>b</sup> *University of Minnesota, 207 Lind Hall, 207 Church Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, U.S.A.*

## KEYWORDS

Communication;  
Leadership presence;  
Gender;  
Accomplishment;  
Interviewing

**Abstract** Statistics about women's presence as CEOs, directors, and board members show relative stagnation over the last few years. Many theories exist to explain this problem, but there is a paucity of specific suggestions targeted at individuals seeking to rise to the top of their organizations. In this article we propose that changing the way women talk about accomplishments can improve leadership presence and aid in promotion. We analyzed video interviews of 20 men and 20 women in leadership roles at Fortune 50 companies. Since leaders will inevitably confront this when interviewing for promotions, we chose to focus on the question: "In your career, what are the accomplishments you are most proud of?" We analyzed content, syntax, gestures, and facial expressions, and identified significant differences in the way men and women talked about accomplishment. Based upon our research, we identify six communication essentials that can help women project confidence: (1) starting strong, (2) staying succinct, (3) dimensionalizing content, (4) owning voice, (5) controlling movement, and (6) projecting warmth.

© 2013 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Communicating accomplishment

How do women translate high-caliber accomplishments into perceptions of high-caliber leadership? A woman we will call Jenny led a project that made \$25 million in revenue for a Fortune 50 bank in

1 month alone, redesigned a loan servicing system facilitating the acquisition of several competitors, and is now the Chief Information Officer (CIO) of a Fortune 50 technology company, but her company sent her for executive coaching because she lacked leadership presence. What was it about her communication style that was perceived as lacking leadership presence in spite of all these accomplishments? Questions like these trouble both women seeking advancement and those in leadership positions seeking to increase the presence of female leaders.

\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [anett@execspeak.com](mailto:anett@execspeak.com) (A.D. Grant),  
[tayl0861@umn.edu](mailto:tayl0861@umn.edu) (A. Taylor)

Underrepresentation of women at the upper levels of management is a well-known problem. Women hold only 16.6% of board seats, 14.3% of executive officer positions, and 4.2% of CEO roles at Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2012). Explanations vary for why this problem exists. Some have argued that men are inherently better at management and business. Others have asserted that with more women in the pipeline, there will be an increase in women leaders. Still others claim that factors like education, family obligation, and work hours explain the differences. However, numerous studies over the last few decades have proven all of these arguments untrue (Chênevert & Tremblay, 2002). Yet the problem remains. Why?

This article argues that difficulties in communicating accomplishment contribute to the problem and presents solutions for enhancing leadership presence. The research findings reported in this article represent responses to the question: "In your career, what are the accomplishments you are most proud of?" Jenny's response illustrates where the disconnect between doing and communicating occurs. After expressions of distaste, 'ums' and 'ahs,' and laughter, she said: "I hate that question. I'd rather talk about opportunities." Jenny isn't alone in her discomfort. In the capacity of a private executive speaking coach working with companies that include (among others) Pfizer, PepsiCo, 3M, Southwest Airlines, and Ralph Lauren, one of our co-authors, Anett Grant, has conducted thousands of personal, confidential, one-on-one coaching sessions with individuals at all levels and types of companies. As part of the standard coaching program, Grant interviews the client. These interviews remain private: clients are aware that neither the interviews nor the content of their responses will be shared with supervisors. This level of privacy allows more open expression of ideas and demonstration of personal communication style. Grant establishes relationships with clients before the recorded interviews, which enables unrestrained and natural responses.

We analyzed video interviews of 20 men and 20 women in leadership roles at Fortune 50 companies (see Table 1). While not exactly identical, the men and women were comparable in title as well as in type

of industry. Likewise, the average tenure at time of visit was 7.53 years for women (15 of 20 known tenure) and 7.64 years for men (11 of 20 known tenure).

The similarities in title, industry type, and tenure enabled us to compare the men's and women's responses in terms of content and style. We wanted to see what exactly happens at the level of words, gestures, and facial expressions when executives are asked to describe their accomplishments since leaders will inevitably be asked about their accomplishments and qualifications during promotional interviews. We transcribed the 40 responses and identified five categories of accomplishment: (1) use of numbers, (2) description of positive monetary impact, (3) mentoring, (4) development of products or processes, and (5) position or longevity at a company. We selected these categories for two reasons: every response included at least one category and all work-related accomplishments fit accordingly. We used the transcriptions to count first-person pronoun usage and tracked gestures and facial expressions through the recordings. The 40 interviews from private coaching sessions spanned from 2001 to 2012. Names have been changed and details limited to protect privacy.

We found surprising and significant differences that all contribute to a greater problem for women with owning success, demanding recognition, and projecting confidence. In their 2003 book *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, Babcock and Laschever pose the question: Could it be that women's tendency to under-communicate their performance results is a greater impediment to success than any perception of their leadership competencies? We argue that these problems with under-communicating accomplishments present continuing barriers to women's advancement and contribute to ongoing perceptions of women as lacking leadership presence. These perceptions "are relevant to women's career progress" (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011, p. 153). We use our research to identify six communication essentials that executives—male and female alike—need to acquire and develop to project confidence: (1) starting strong, (2) staying succinct, (3) dimensionalizing content, (4) owning voice, (5) controlling movement, and (6) projecting warmth.

Table 1. Video interviews

	Position			Industry Type					
	CIO COO CEO	Vice President	Director Manager	Travel Delivery	Food Supply	Retail	Industry Technology	Finance	Medical
Women (20)	1	7	12	2	7	4	4	1	2
Men (20)	3	9	8	1	6	3	8	1	1

## 2. Projecting confidence differently: The challenges

Tannen (1995, p. 147) pointed out that “people in powerful positions are likely to reward styles similar to their own, because we all tend to take as self-evident the logic of our own styles.” This means that, since men occupy a significant majority of advanced leadership positions, male candidates receive promotions more frequently (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). Drawing on their own findings and earlier studies, Furst and Reeves (2008, p. 373) explained:

Women may be passed over for job offers or promotions in favor of men because males, who are in a position to hire, are predisposed to hiring individuals similar to themselves. More specifically, organizations hire or promote based on the perceived ‘fit’ of the candidate with existing top managers—most of whom are men.

People gravitate to others like themselves, and in business, that means male leaders tend to gravitate to male up-and-comers. There are, of course, exceptions, but our findings suggest that linguistic features contribute to this unconscious bias.

When asked to talk about their accomplishments, the men in our study were more homogenous in terms of what they talked about and the length of their responses. Of the five categories we identified as present to some degree in all responses (use of numbers, positive monetary impact, mentoring, development of products or processes, and position or longevity), 90% of men listed three or more of these categories as accomplishments compared to 45% of women; and 90% of men used numbers, cited their positive monetary impact on the company, and described products or processes they developed compared to 45%–55% of women.

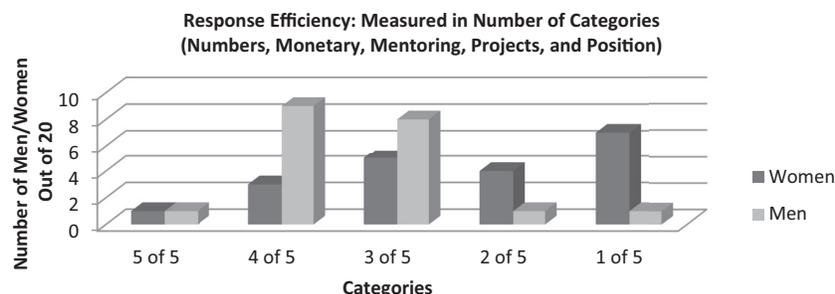
Men’s responses were more typical in length. The average response time for men was 1.52 minutes while the average for women was 1.79 minutes. Women spoke 0.27 minutes (16.2 seconds) longer on average, but women’s response time was more

variable. Of the 20 women’s responses, 8 (or 40%) fell outside of one standard deviation. An additional 4 of the 20 were either exactly at or within 0.05 of the standard deviation, meaning that 16 (or 80%) showed significant variance. Of the 20 men, only 4 (or 20%) fell outside of one standard deviation; and only an additional 1 of the 20 was at or within 0.05 of the standard deviation, meaning just 25% of the men showed significant variance. Basically, this data indicates that the average male response was a lot more average than the average female response in terms of content and length (see Figure 1).

Our results matched those of other studies that noted similar phrasing and content of male responses to specific questions. Tannen’s (1994) research showed correspondence in male responses to those of a study by Anne Statham that asked 22 men and 18 women managers to talk about their management styles. Statham found similarities in terms of content and phrasing amongst the responses of men and women, but while men’s responses were similar to other men and women’s to the other women, as groups, the men’s responses were markedly different from the women’s. Ely et al. (2011) found that men in leadership development programs relied on imitation strategies that derived from modeling mentors—who were most likely other men—and more aggressively tried to signal credibility by displaying conforming behaviors. This helps explain part of the reason why some women’s communication styles may be perceived as less ‘normal’ by interviewers or leaders. Authority figures subconsciously gravitate toward communication styles that match their own; consequently, many women may be perceived as not projecting confidence, authority, and competence.

Numerous advances have been made by women over the last few decades, but research finds that persistent second-generation gender bias contributes to the current statistics about (the lack of) women’s presence at the upper levels of management. Prime, Jonsen, Carter, and Maznevski (2008, p. 202) found “strong evidence that stereotyping of

Figure 1. Response efficiency



women's and men's leadership is widespread among corporate managers." This agrees with what Ely et al. (2011) found in their study of managers and supervisors: that while managers and supervisors rated women higher than men in leadership competencies, they rated the same women lower in leadership potential. As a result of their research, the authors emphasized the importance of educating executives—many of whom want to develop and promote women leaders and are puzzled by the seeming intractability of the problem—about second-generation gender bias and differences in communication and leadership styles. We agree with this recommendation, but by focusing on the nitty-gritty details of what is said, how it is said, and how long it takes to say it, we also endorse communication essentials that can aid women in projecting leadership presence.

### 3. Starting strong

In every arena from sports to the spotlight, starting strong is important. Public speaking coaches have been teaching speakers to remove hesitations and fillers, particularly at the beginning of a speech, since the first recorded speaking texts like Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Fillers—words such as 'um,' 'er,' and 'ah'—contribute significantly to perceptions of the speaker as lacking confidence or knowledge (Brennan & Williams, 1995; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Corley, MacGregor, & Donaldson, 2007). Studies have also found that hesitations and fillers affect language comprehension and contribute to audiences losing attention or taking a speaker less seriously (Bortfeld, Leon, Bloom, Schober, & Brennan, 2001). However, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) found that using fillers is a choice. In other words, a speaker can learn to reduce or eliminate them, especially in situations where it is important to impress with communication style.

We found that 60% of the women (12 of 20) but only 30% of the men (6 of 20) had hesitations or fillers while thinking about how to respond to the question. This indicates that even before speaking, the women far more frequently engaged in behavior that signals a lack of confidence. Other nonverbal indicators of discomfort often accompanied these verbal signals of uncertainty. For example, Linda, an international change leader, played with her glass of water, avoided eye contact, and tilted her head to the side while repeatedly saying "um." These behaviors signaled problems rather than confidence. Longer pauses combined with shifting position characterized all but 1 of the 12 women with hesitations. Several of the men with hesitations, however, connected the filler to the first word and still began quickly. Charlie,

a senior vice president, said "um" while thinking, but he immediately launched into his first sentence. While both hesitations suggest potential problems with sentence formation, the quicker response combined with direct eye contact suggested Charlie was more confident about his answer than Linda. We observed the same pattern as Charlie with all but 1 of the 6 men with fillers.

Starting strong is a communication essential that can be developed. Structure supports spontaneity and helps eliminate the hesitations that arise from uncertainty, discomfort, or nervousness. Begin responses by using phrases from the question that set up the message. This functions as a headline would in a written list. Mentally structuring responses like a bulleted list underneath a main point or headline provides the confidence to eliminate hesitations and fillers. When speakers use a structural pattern for responses, they will respond quickly, be organized, and adapt to unexpected situations.

### 4. Staying succinct

Business settings demand succinct, clear communication, but this can be an area where many executives falter. Tannen (1994, p. 85) noted that directness in conversation is critically important in American business settings "because it is aligned with power." Her research found that women are perceived as being less direct than men. Tannen suggested that this is a result of several factors, such as women asking questions or making suggestions rather than direct statements. With her research in mind, we measured the length of responses for the Fortune 50 men and women in our study. We uncovered results that, more than a decade later, confirmed many of Tannen's findings.

On average, women in our study paused longer before beginning to speak and also spoke longer overall. Women took 1.2 seconds longer to begin speaking than men, and women's average response length was 16.2 seconds longer. The difference between the medians for women and men was even greater at 26.4 seconds. These numbers may not seem that large, but in communication, seconds can feel like hours. Particularly when expecting a response, a fidgeting pause of 4.2 seconds—the average for women—filled with 'um' and 'ah' can seem substantially longer than the 3-second average for men. The difference between the medians is nearly long enough for Usain Bolt to win Gold in the 100-meter dash twice. The nearly 30 additional seconds for women than men occupies the same amount of time as a \$3.5 million ad during the Super Bowl, clearly more than enough time to make a big

impact on listeners. By taking longer across the board, women can appear less direct.

Practicing quick-thinking skills and keeping responses to the point promotes the perception of directness. Just as organization will enable spontaneity in responses and decrease the presence of fillers and hesitations, structuring responses will promote concision. Keep in mind a hierarchy of information that prioritizes linking a new point to the central message, identifying the concept or point, and then illustrating that concept. Continually coming back to the central message after identifying and explaining a notion will keep speakers on track, organized, and brief.

## 5. Dimensionalizing content

The very word dimensionalizing implies adding complexity and depth, just like moving from a flat 2D picture to a robust 3D image. Successful executives will distinguish themselves by enacting this same process when communicating. Research has found that women conceive of success differently (Heslin, 2005; Sturges, 1999). Jane Sturges conducted interviews with 18 male and 18 female managers at a British company to explore the definition of career success. Her study focused on how individuals described success rather than on external markers like salary, number of promotions, etc. Sturges (1999, p. 247) argued that “the women managers who took part in this study were more likely than the men to describe what success meant to them with reference to internal criteria, especially accomplishment and achievement, and intangible criteria, in particular personal recognition.” We contribute by using our findings to specify exactly what those differences are: fewer numbers, less reference to monetary impact, and fewer women taking credit for products or processes that have helped the company.

While it is difficult to say what defines an effective response to the question of what accomplishments an individual is proud of, we found that five categories covered all the work-related accomplishments mentioned by men and women. To determine an effective response, we observed the number of categories mentioned and the response length. The five categories include:

1. Use of numbers;
2. Description of positive monetary impact on the company;
3. Mentoring or team building;

4. Development of a product or process that benefited the company; and

5. Position or longevity at the company.

While similar numbers of men and women referenced mentoring (though more women than men) or position as accomplishments, significant differences were noted in terms of using numbers (90% of men but 55% of women), citing positive monetary impact (90% of men but 45% of women), and describing a product or process developed (90% of men but 55% of women). Sally, a vice president, represented many of the women, 55% of whom mentioned just one or two of the five categories compared to only 10% of men who mentioned only one or two categories. At 3:14 she had one of the longest responses, but she listed only two categories: numbers and mentoring. Sally’s response was not wrong by any means, and she illustrated well the interactions between herself as a leader and the team she developed. However, given that women’s responses were on average nearly 20 seconds longer, the length and fewer categories of accomplishment may hinder the projection of confidence and make men in our sample seem more proficient.

Ibarra and Obodaru (2009, p. 64) stated that “one of the biggest developmental hurdles that aspiring leaders, male and female alike, must clear is learning to sell their ideas—their vision of the future—to numerous stakeholders.” We argue that selling ideas links closely to selling accomplishments and speaks to the difference in effective responses—measured in terms of number of accomplishments listed—from women and men. Speaking upward requires going beyond showing how something has been accomplished to quantifying impact. Vision demands a focus on the future, and detailing the impacts of an accomplishment demonstrates a broader picture of how an individual’s achievements fit into the team or company as a whole. Dimensionalizing content will add complexity and provide a more complete picture of exactly what a leader has done. In order to communicate depth of thinking, one must communicate breadth of thinking. This communication essential goes a long way toward closing the gap between producing and communicating successes in a manner that increases perceptions of competence and leadership presence.

## 6. Owning voice

Female executives must own their voices and communicate their successes, but women often denigrate their accomplishments to maintain modesty

(Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Tannen, 1994). Numerous social factors can make it hard for many women to talk about their accomplishments without sounding like they are boasting. Eagly and Carli (2007) agreed that self-promotion can be risky for women. While self-promotion conveys status and competence, women who promote themselves may be perceived as overly aggressive, selfish, and unlikeable. This complicates upward communication because many women struggle to sell their ideas and themselves as leaders. However, the answer is not for businesswomen to just imitate businessmen when developing leader identities. Numerous scholars, researchers, managers, and leaders have noted the danger of simply imitating male behavior (Vanderbroeck, 2010). This particularly sticky bind can make it challenging for executives to find a confident but not off-putting voice.

Voice is a difficult concept to articulate, but we used Tannen's observations about pronouns as a starting point. In her research, Tannen (1994) found that men say 'I' in situations where women say 'we'; this can lead to women's accomplishments being camouflaged. We tracked the usage of first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my, myself) and first-person plural pronouns (we, our, us, ourselves). When adjusting for length of response, women in our study used singular pronouns an average of 7.29 times per minute, but the average for men was 8.82 times per minute; whereas women used plural pronouns 3.32 times per minute, and men used these same pronouns 3.03 times per minute. With these averages in mind, we created four conversation styles, which we called filters: (1) individuals who used both first-person singular and first-person plural pronouns more than the average woman and the average man; (2) individuals who used first-person singular pronouns more than the average woman and average man but first-person plural pronouns less than the average woman and the average man; (3) individuals who used first-person singular pronouns less than the average woman and the average man but first-person plural pronouns more than the average woman and the average man; and (4) individuals who used both first-person singular and plural pronouns less than the average woman and average man.

These filters matched 17 of the 20 women and 16 of the 20 men. The most popular filter was the style using first-person singular pronouns more than both the average man and woman but using first-person plural pronouns less than the average man and woman. The greater-than-average usage of first-person singular makes this a highly self-focused and personal voice. This was an effective strategy for the 8 men who fit this filter because most of

these men mentioned three or more of the five categories. Alex, a CIO, was a perfect representative for the group of 8 men who used this style. After a miniscule lag of 1.8 seconds, he launched into a 59-second response packed full of numbers and information about his positive monetary impact, mentoring, and position at the company. The efficient, information-laden response matched Alex's highly personal voice. This personal voice characterized by first-person singular pronouns was not, however, an effective strategy for the 6 women who fit this filter. Of these women, 5 (or 83%) referenced only one category. None of them mentioned their monetary impact or products or processes they designed. The greater reliance of men in our study on highly personal styles conveyed by 'I,' 'me,' and 'myself' matches research by Tannen (1994); but our results indicate that simply emulating this communication style does not result in women talking about more of their accomplishments.

The filter for less-than-average usage of both first-person plural and singular pronouns captured only 1 man, making it the least popular style for men, but it matched 5 women, making it the second most popular style for women—and the 3 women not captured by any filter were closest to this style. While this style presented a more impersonal voice by abstracting the self—either individually or in a group—from the response, women employing this style were by far the most effective with all 5 women using numbers and describing products or processes they had developed, and 80% of these women listing their positive monetary impact as an accomplishment. Julie, a research and development director at a technology company, referenced all five categories in her response, the only woman to do so, and she was one of the women with an impersonal voice. With Babcock and Laschever's (2003) research showing how many women feel uncomfortable 'tooting their own horn,' so to speak, this impersonal voice may allow women to own their accomplishments without feeling like they are bragging.

Decreasing personal pronouns impersonalizes the voice and abstracts the self while simultaneously focusing the listener on the categories of achievement. This unique communication style was overwhelmingly gendered female in our findings. While it does encompass the benefits of the 'I'-focused communication style, the abstraction of the self can make the speaker seem distant. Julie and the other women using this style tended to use second- and third-person pronouns. While occasional use of second- and third-person pronouns is natural, relying on them disguises the speaker and can contribute to perceptions of the speaker as disinterested or overly compartmentalized. Tannen (1994) related the

anecdote of a promotion meeting where each senior manager went through a list of individuals in his (the senior managers were all male) group and said whether the individual was promotable. In spite of many women in all groups, no women were identified as promotable because each woman was described as lacking confidence. While it is likely that many of these women felt confident, they were not projecting confidence. Why? Our results indicate that part of the reason is women do not sell themselves in terms of accomplishments as well as men do. We recommend a number of adjustments for all executives: Focus on impact. Talk more about numbers, monetary impact, and products but less in terms of total length. Furthermore, female executives must not abstract themselves entirely because first-person singular pronouns indicate individuated identity and self-focus (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). The impersonal voice in 5 of our study's women did correlate with effective responses in terms of the number of categories listed, but the risk with this style is that speakers do not own their voice through first-person pronouns. Combining the efficiency of the impersonal voice with the inclusiveness of an active voice can enable executives to focus on their positive impact rather than feeling like they are simply promoting themselves.

## 7. Controlling movement

Executives often struggle with how much to gesture. Some people cling to chair arms or lecterns for dear life, and others gesture so much they appear to be in flight. So just how much is enough? Earlier research connected gesturing to low status (Rosenfeld, 1966), but Burgoon and Le Poire (1999) found that higher social power was attributed to people who used more hand gestures. In a study carried out at the corporate headquarters of a convenience store chain, Hall and Friedman (1999) found that high-status people in the company—male and female alike—used more hand gestures. However, gestures and status are not simply correlated. Maricchiolo, Gnisci, Bonaiuto, and Ficca (2009) examined how gestures impact the persuasiveness of a speaker's message; they found that at an average rate of 14 per minute, gestures can increase a speaker's persuasiveness. There are several categories of gestures. The most effective are 'illustrative' or 'ideational' gestures that are related to the content of speech. Conversely, gestures like playing with an object at a table or just anxiously moving hands or arms distract from the message and decrease persuasiveness. We labeled those not linked to content as 'energy' gestures. Repeatedly moving a

hand up and down while stumbling for words or thinking is an example of an energy gesture, but a raised hand with a single elevated finger while saying "first" connects the gesture to the verbal content and therefore would be considered an illustrative gesture. For greater clarity in tracking types of gestures, we counted total gestures as well as ideational or linked-to-content gestures. Vocal fluctuations are not included as energy gestures, and all interviewees were seated, so we counted only gestures made above lap level.

The average rate of gestures for our Fortune 50 women executives, adjusted for time, was 15.78 gestures per minute; the average rate for men was 13.76. Likewise, the median for total gestures was 15.5 per minute for women and 13.3 per minute for men. We found that the women in our study not only had more gestures on average, but they also used more linked-to-speech gestures. The average, adjusted for time, for ideational gestures was 7.2 per minute for women but 6 per minute for men. In other words, women more purposefully used gestures to enhance their communication. They also used more gestures that were not connected to content. These gestures expressed unfocused energy of the speaker. The average number of energy gestures for women was 8.5 per minute and 7.8 per minute for men. Interestingly, all but 1 of the women had a ratio of energy or not-linked-to-content gestures to ideational gestures ranging from 1:1 to 2:1. Michelle, a vice president at a Fortune 50 fashion company, was the only woman with a ratio of 1:1 for energy to ideational gestures. This ratio was the most optimal we recorded; this gestural pattern is effective because it focuses the attention of the listener on the content rather than on the speaker. Michelle spoke in an organized manner, and that structure reflected itself in the gestures she used. She said: "I think the most important accomplishment that I am proud of is building teams and sharing what I have learned." By using gestures to illustrate building and sharing, Michelle emphasized the actions she has taken and the impact those actions have had. Her gestures supplemented her message and kept the focus on the content. Comparatively, 4 of the 20 men had only energy gestures and the remaining 13 men ranged anywhere from a ratio of 1:1 to 10:1, indicating greater variability among men, with some using many more.

To be persuasive and use gestures to highlight content, executives should focus on connecting gestures to the message. In an executive setting, the rigor of the thinking and the strength of the content must be the focus, but too many energy gestures showcase the speaker and the emotional state of the speaker. Not only does this distract from the message,

but it can invite scrutiny on the specific idiosyncrasies or gender of the speaker, which can obliterate the message entirely. Some energy gestures will not negatively impact the perception of leadership presence; research indicates that high-status speakers use more gestures overall. However, to maximize a speaking occasion, ideational gestures that link to the content will create distinction and contribute to a perception of the speaker as skilled at self-control.

## 8. Projecting warmth

Leaders who inspire others get results, and our accomplished executives shared many stories showcasing their ability to influence others. Julie, mentioned earlier, said:

I was hired as an expert. However, at the same time, I was so green and young; just from school. . . .The first challenge. . .is to establish your credibility, establish trust, and. . .really work with the team. The team had to accept me. . . .I was pretty happy that after 6 months, I was accepted and I was one of them. . . .[That] gave me the opportunity to really influence them, work with them, and have trust when I present the data I have.

Julie knew that to get the results she needed from her team, she needed their trust, and projecting warmth through smiling and spontaneous facial expressions goes a long way toward building relationships and developing leadership presence.

Older conceptions of leadership did not consider likeability a necessary or even positive attribute. However, studies of the workplace confirm that likeability and warmth enhance leadership ability and influence (Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995). In fact, Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick (2006, p. 77) found that "warmth is judged before competence, and warmth judgments carry more weight in affective and behavioral reactions." Smiling is one of the easiest ways to judge warmth and likeability, and numerous studies focus on smiling, leadership, and gender, with several studies having found that women tend to smile more than men (Cashdan, 1998; Hall, 1984; Hall & Halberstadt, 1986; Hall, Horgan, & Carter, 2002). Earlier theories argued that women smile more because smiling is a mark of subservience and the female sex is a marker of low status (Henley, 1977; LaFrance & Henley, 1997); later studies, however, have not confirmed this observation (Cashdan, 1998; Hall, Horgan, & Carter, 2002). Hall, Horgan, and Carter (2002) found that women smiling more could not be accounted for in terms of status roles or self-reported feelings of status or power. While men

smile less often, Hall and Friedman (1999) found that both high status men and women generally smiled more. Explanations for why women smile more vary, but in research focused on the role of smiling and warmth in the workplace, there is virtual consensus that likeability enhances leadership influence and persuasiveness.

We found that women smiled nearly twice as much as men at 3.3 times per minute compared to 1.7 times per minute. Interestingly, only 2 of the 20 women did not smile at all when responding, but 8 of the 20 men did not smile. While on average women smiled twice as much as men, it was also true that far more women smiled at least some. Our findings not only confirmed that women smile more on average, but also that women had more spontaneous facial expressions. Women averaged 10.3 spontaneous facial expressions per minute, but men only 7.8. Many of the same studies on smiling also focused on other forms of nonverbal communication and concluded that not only do individuals with high status or high power have more facial expressions, but they are believed to be more skilled in facial expression (Carney, Hall, & Smith LeBeau, 2005). Smiling and facial expressions project warmth, and research finds that leaders associated with higher levels of likeableness are also associated with greater influence (Awamleh, 2003).

Sarah, a technical director at a technology company, smiled throughout and had numerous spontaneous facial expressions. She smiled when making a joke, when talking about international projects she had led, and when talking about bringing growth to specific sectors of her company. Her small smiles and facial expressions connected to her message. On the other hand, Jillian, a director, smiled less than Sarah, and smiled at the end of her response and at places where she appeared to want to elicit a response from the listener rather than in relation to her content. She also used many energy gestures, stumbled often, and shifted position: all indicators of her discomfort. The contrast between Sarah's and Jillian's smiles indicates that smiling and facial expressions have the potential to convey not only warmth but also anxiety. David, a human resources manager, did not smile at all while speaking, but he had numerous spontaneous facial expressions. Both Sarah and David connected to their message and reflected this connection through their facial expressions.

Motivating others depends upon communication essentials, and charismatic leaders either possess naturally or develop the skill of projecting warmth. Both men and women smile, so determining how much to smile is a question of degree. As numerous studies and scholars have noted, women in the workplace face a difficult situation of needing to

be perceived as likeable in order to be considered competent or successful (Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995). Especially in the 1990s, women who emulated men's leadership style were considered harsh; the famous Supreme Court case of *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* in 1989 established that discrimination against women like Ann Hopkins, who seemed too masculine, was illegal. Times have changed, and it is advantageous for both male and female executives to be considered likeable to motivate others. However, executives must differentiate between spontaneous expression of connection to their message and response-seeking behavior that signals a lack of confidence or anxiety. When speakers visualize their message and focus on the images they wish to convey, facial expressions will be spontaneous and natural. This overcomes the obstacle of appearing harsh or unyielding that can accompany sustained or unchanging facial expressions. Spontaneous expressions and smiles connected to the content also highlight the message rather than the speaker, similar to linked-to-message gestures.

## 9. Lessons learned

Developing leadership presence requires attention to the details of how we talk, how our bodies move, and what we say. While we do recommend developing communication essentials, we certainly are not identifying this as a problem that demands a 'fix-the-women' approach. Rather, all executives can develop a more persuasive, smooth style. Our analysis of the 40 executive leaders' interviews enabled us to identify six communication essentials with specific recommendations for each.

### 9.1. Lesson #1: Start strong

Remove fillers (e.g., 'um,' 'er,' 'ah') before responses. Besides paying conscious attention to fillers, focus on using structure in all responses. Begin responses by using phrases from the question that set up the message; this functions as a headline would in a written list. Mentally structure responses like a bulleted list underneath a main point or headline.

### 9.2. Lesson #2: Stay succinct

Avoid lengthy elaboration. Practice quick-thinking skills and keep responses to the point. Just as structure will enable spontaneity in responses and decrease the presence of fillers and hesitations, it will promote concision. Keep in mind a hierarchy of information that prioritizes linking a new point to the central message, identifying the concept or

point, and then illustrating that concept. Continually come back to the central message after identifying a notion and providing a brief explanation.

### 9.3. Lesson #3: Dimensionalize content

Focus on the future, and detail the impacts of an accomplishment or idea to demonstrate a broader picture. Dimensionalizing content will add complexity and provide a more complete response. In order to communicate depth of thinking, one must communicate breadth of thinking. Talk more about numbers, monetary impact, and products, but less in terms of total length.

### 9.4. Lesson #4: Own voice

Don't avoid first-person pronouns, particularly when talking about individual accomplishments or contributions.

### 9.5. Lesson #5: Control movement

Connect gestures to the message. Some energy gestures will not negatively impact the perception of leadership presence, but to maximize a speaking occasion, use ideational gestures that link to the content to create distinction and contribute to a perception of the speaker as skilled at self-control.

### 9.6. Lesson #6: Project warmth

Whether through smiles or spontaneous facial expressions, projecting warmth and confidence inspires others. Avoid excesses on either end of the spectrum—no smiles or facial expressions or too much smiling and expression—by naturally responding to content. Visualize the message and focus on the images to encourage spontaneous and authentic facial expressions.

### 9.7. To continue . . .

While these recommendations are specific to the issues we identified in our research, female executives face many communication challenges that can be overcome by being centered. This may sound ambiguous initially, but by centering themselves in terms of posture, voice, gestures, ideas, and rhythm, female executives can present themselves as competent, capable, and communicative leaders. In terms of posture, center the body to avoid leaning or slouching whether standing or sitting. Be aware of the physical environment and adapt to it to maintain balanced body postures. Many women neglect to think about their voice. It too should be balanced.

Avoid uptalk because the higher tone of voice at the end of sentences produces tension in the body. An even tone that allows the voice to drop keeps the body and voice relaxed. Gestures should also be centered. Too few or too many both suggest tension, but a balance of gestures connected to content engages audiences. Additionally, executives need to be centered in terms of ideas. Structure that highlights the central message and key points will align the audience or listener with the speaker. Finally, focus on rhythm when speaking to audiences. Some people are naturally slow while others are fast. Set a moderate pace for audiences to follow. When female executives are centered in these ways, they project leadership presence. These techniques can be cultivated through avenues such as private executive coaching or consistent attention by individuals. With awareness and practice, female executives can develop the skills to communicate with power and precision.

## 10. The view from behind the camcorder

Jenny may have hated the question that required her to own her accomplishments, but she followed up that expression of distaste with a response that used numbers, detailed the positive monetary impact she has had on various companies, and explained products and processes she had developed to benefit the company. As CIO of a large company, she knows her stuff, is confident about her skills, and obviously impressed numerous managers along the way with her upward communication skills. However, she was sent to develop leadership presence. Our findings accumulated from behind the camcorder help explain why Jenny has been successful—and how she can be even more successful—but most importantly have identified communication essentials that can empower both men and women to project confidence and become the executives they want to be. Jenny ended her response by saying: “It’s results, I think.” With attention to communication, female executives can get results to change the current statistics and take their places as CEOs, directors, and board members.

## References

- Awamleh, R. (2003). Towards a model of charismatic non-verbal impression management. *International Business & Economics Journal*, 2(7), 27–38.
- Babcock, L., & Laschever, S. (2003). *Women don't ask: Negotiation and the gender divide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Bortfeld, H., Leon, S. D., Bloom, J. E., Schober, M. F., & Brennan, S. E. (2001). Disfluency rates in conversation: Effects of age, relationship, topic, role, and gender. *Language and Speech*, 44(2), 123–147.
- Brennan, S. E., & Williams, M. (1995). The feeling of another's knowing: Prosody and filled pauses as cues to listeners about the metacognitive states of speakers. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 34(6), 383–398.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Le Poire, B. A. (1999). Nonverbal cues and interpersonal judgments: Participant and observer perceptions of intimacy, dominance, composure, and formality. *Communication Monographs*, 66(2), 105–124.
- Carli, L. L., LaFleur, S. J., & Loeber, C. C. (1995). Nonverbal behavior, gender, and influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(6), 1030–1041.
- Carney, D. R., Hall, J. A., & Smith LeBeau, L. (2005). Beliefs about the nonverbal expression of social power. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 29(2), 105–123.
- Cashdan, E. (1998). Smiles, speech, and body posture: How women and men display sociometric status and power. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 22(4), 209–228.
- Catalyst (2012). *2012 Catalyst census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors*. Retrieved February 11, 2013, from <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/2012-catalyst-census-fortune-500-women-board-directors>
- Chênevert, D., & Tremblay, M. (2002). Managerial career success in Canadian organizations: Is gender a determinant? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 13(6), 920–941.
- Clark, H. H., & Fox Tree, J. E. (2002). Using uh and um in spontaneous speaking. *Cognition*, 84(1), 73–111.
- Corley, M., MacGregor, L. J., & Donaldson, D. I. (2007). It's the way you, er, say it: Hesitations in speech affect language comprehension. *Cognition*, 105(3), 658–668.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Women and the labyrinth of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), 63–71.
- Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women's leadership development programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(3), 474–493.
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., & Glick, P. (2006). Universal dimensions of social cognition: Warmth and competence. *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(2), 77–83.
- Furst, S. A., & Reeves, M. (2008). Queens of the hill: Creative destruction and the emergence of executive leadership of women. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(3), 372–384.
- Hall, J. A. (1984). *Nonverbal sex differences: Communication accuracy and expressive style*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hall, J. A., & Friedman, G. B. (1999). Status, gender, and nonverbal behavior: A study of structured interactions between employees of a company. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(9), 1082–1091.
- Hall, J. A., & Halberstadt, A. G. (1986). Smiling and gazing. In J. Hyde & M. Linn (Eds.), *The psychology of gender: Advances through meta-analysis* (pp. 136–158). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Hall, J. A., Horgan, T. G., & Carter, J. D. (2002). Assigned and felt status in relation to observer-coded and participant-reported smiling. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 26(2), 63–81.
- Henley, N. (1977). *Body politics: Power, sex, and nonverbal communication*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Heslin, P. A. (2005). Conceptualizing and evaluating career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2), 113–136.
- Hoobler, J. M., Lemmon, G., & Wayne, S. J. (2011). Women's underrepresentation in upper management: New insights on a persistent problem. *Organizational Dynamics*, 40(3), 151–156.

- Ibarra, H., & Obodaru, O. (2009). Women and the vision thing. *Harvard Business Review*, 87(1), 62–70.
- LaFrance, M., & Henley, N. M. (1997). On oppressing hypotheses: Or, differences in nonverbal sensitivity revisited. In M. R. Walsh (Ed.), *Women, men, and gender: Ongoing debates* (pp. 104–119). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Maricchiolo, F., Gnisci, A., Bonaiuto, M., & Ficca, G. (2009). Effects of different types of hand gestures in persuasive speech on receivers' evaluations. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 24(2), 239–266.
- Pennebaker, J. W., Mehl, M. R., & Niederhoffer, K. G. (2003). Psychological Aspects of Natural Language Use: Our words, our selves. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54(1), 547–577.
- Prime, J., Jonsen, K., Carter, N., & Maznevski, M. L. (2008). Managers' perceptions of women and men leaders: A cross cultural comparison. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, 8(2), 171–210.
- Rosenfeld, H. M. (1966). Approval-seeking and approval-inducing functions of verbal and nonverbal responses in the dyad. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 4(6), 597–605.
- Sturges, J. (1999). What it means to succeed: Personal conceptions of career success held by male and female managers at different ages. *British Journal of Management*, 10(3), 239–252.
- Tannen, D. (1994). *Talking from 9 to 5: How women's and men's conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Tannen, D. (1995). The Power of Talk. *Harvard Business Review*, 73(5), 139–148.
- Vanderbroeck, P. (2010). The traps that keep women from reaching the top and how to avoid them. *Journal of Management*, 29(9), 764–770.