



# 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.*

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**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.

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## 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

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