

Circles of Light

WOMEN'S WISDOM



Be Clear. Be Confident. Be Courageous.

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Mary McGlynn
President and Owner



In a rare, magical moment at a writers' conference in San Miguel de Allende in 2017, PowerSpeaking Founder Rick Gilbert interviewed guest lecturer Gloria Steinem. In the course of the interview, she talked about the power of coming together in a circle to tell our truths, talk about dreams, and create a "force field" of support. She told the story of a visit to a small village in Zambia, where she would hear, up close, about the women's experiences with sex trafficking. Sitting in a circle in a field, she listened to the women's stories. At one point she asked what could be done to stop the trafficking. "And they said, if we can grow enough maize, we would have food security and we could pay our kids' school fees, and we wouldn't have to do that [participate in sex trafficking]. I said, okay, how can you grow enough maize? And they said, well, if we had an electrified fence around a lot of acres—because otherwise, the elephants come in and eat it." So Gloria raised a few thousand dollars for a fence. "I went back the next year. They had a bumper crop of maize, enough to sell for their kids' school fees as well as for their own food," she said. "If you had asked me what is the cure for sex trafficking, I never would have said an electrified fence. So this is why we need to listen."

That force field Gloria talked about—women coming together in a circle (literally or figuratively), making their voices heard, and listening to and supporting each other—really is, as she says, "a magical thing." Whether it's in a rural village in Africa or a high-tech company anywhere in the world, women have everything to gain from relying on each other's wisdom. And that idea is at the heart of *Confident Speaking for Women*, a workshop and learning community we launched in the summer of 2018.

In the process of developing *Confident Speaking for Women*, we interviewed female professionals in high-tech, the sciences, nonprofits, government, education and the arts. Our vision was to gather the collective wisdom of women who could speak, from first-hand experience, to how we can become more powerful communicators. Their advice? Be clear. Be confident. Be courageous.

The experience of talking with these women was extraordinary. The stories and advice are invaluable.

Speaking of sharing wisdom, recently I listened to an interview in which Whoopi Goldberg was asked about being a mentor. I love her response: "We're here for a reason," she said. "I believe a bit of the reason is to throw little torches out to lead people through the dark." With *A Circle of Light: Women's Wisdom*, we will shed light on the path to becoming a clear, confident and courageous communicator. What you will read are just a few highlights of the wisdom we gathered from an extraordinary group of women, which helped us create *Confident Speaking for Women*. We are confident they will help you on your journey.

Be Clear. Be Confident. Be Courageous.

Be Clear.

Great ideas are lost if they aren't communicated well. Clear, concise language and a strong delivery are what convince people to listen—and keep listening.

A number of the women we interviewed cited smart data selection as an important part of being a clear and effective communicator. Nina Richardson, Silicon Labs Board Member, talks about how she learned over time that when asked to give an update on some project or other, she was more effective if she not only summarized, but synthesized the data in her response. "Often, someone was looking to me as an executive or a leader to take that information and just give the kernels or the bits and pieces that were important, not the laundry list of everything that actually happened."

That's not to say there isn't a place for mounds of supporting data. It's often great to have, especially in high-stakes communications. In our *Speaking Up: Presenting to Decision Makers* program, we tell all boardroom presenters to make their first line their bottom line—but be ready with plenty of data if the executives want to dive in.

Silicon Valley executive Colleen Berube applied that wisdom when meeting with her manager. "When I would go to my boss, I would put a summary together and bring the whole analysis, all the paper with me in a stack," she explains. "And I would say, 'Here are all the details, and you're free to go through them, but give me time to take you through the summary.'" Creating clarity by setting the framework and focusing on key findings before becoming engrossed in the detail is a powerful way to communicate. And when we do it, we not only help others better understand, but also, build credibility and trust.

Colleen also touched on another aspect of clarity that I think is critically important to women who are or aspire to be leaders, and that is creating a clear business context for employees or team members.



"Those are the people who really stand out, the ones who can nail the story in three points, and then be masterful in the way they answer questions."

Shannon Brayton,
Marketing & Comms
Executive, Bessemer
Venture Partners



"I think people underestimate how long it takes to prepare for a presentation. They think that you can prepare as you're composing slides and that's not really the case at all."

Lynne Zaledonis,
Senior Director of Product
Marketing, Salesforce

Be Clear.

Continued...

"When you're leading a team, the ability for every person to understand how what they do every day matters to the outcome of the company, is what creates success," she says. "I try to create that context for people in terms of why we're doing what we're doing, and how the work that we do every day matters to the objectives of the company." Women leaders like Colleen know that people are inspired and energized by having a clear sense of purpose and place in the big picture.

Lynne Zaledonis, Senior Director of Product Marketing at Salesforce, makes a great point about clear, effective communication no matter your place in the organization. "Whether it's at an individual contributor level, or you're managing an entire department of three hundred people, the ability to be able to communicate is essential, because even at the individual contributor level, you're still trying to get your project across the line, or your position, or your point held, and it doesn't really matter how good you are in the back of the office with a bunch of spreadsheets," she says. "If you can't communicate the project that you're working on, or the goal of what you're trying to accomplish, then it's going to go unnoticed."

Finally, Cindy Solomon, Leadership Development Consultant and author, urges women to avoid "talk traps" that muddy their message. "When women put a lot of inconsequential words around their thoughts or their ideas or their opinions, or they hedge, apologize, raise their hand, come up at the end vocally as if they're asking permission for their opinion or idea," she says, "all of those things diminish the content because of the delivery." So true. Instead of, "Like, I don't mean to be too pushy here, but, like, maybe it's time to consider the need, or perhaps just the possibility of increasing the budget?", how about, "In order for this project to move forward, we will need to increase the budget by fifteen percent, and here's the data to support it."

So, what do we need in order to come out of that proverbial back office and communicate effectively? Turns out, it's confidence.



"So my personal philosophy with communication is, read your audience, speak to the main points, explain where you have to. Move on when you're done. Get your point across in the shortest amount of time that you can."

*Rajani Shailender,
Vice President, Concentrix
Catalyst*

Be Confident.

"Own it. You're capable, and you need to stand up and show what you can contribute to this world. Nobody else is going to push you. Nobody else is going to help you get to the front. You do it on your own. Stand up and make your presence felt."

How's that for cut-to-the-chase advice? Rajani Shailender, Vice President of Sales for Tech Mahindra, is spot on. But let's look at a few of the specific communication skills and behaviors that add up to that kind of confidence.

A number of the women we spoke with mentioned the power of creating a strong physical presence when speaking. "When I'm presenting I'm pretty physical," says Colleen Berube, Silicon Valley executive. "I get up, I move around. Even in places where people think we would all just sit at the table and talk to each other, if you stand up, you automatically create presence." Rajani believes in connecting through the eyes. "I think eye contact is extremely important. I think it's the first step to holding the other person's attention. Before you even open your mouth, you grab their attention through their eyes. And you keep that attention by keeping that contact firm," she says.

Continuing the theme of body language, Cindy Solomon, Leadership Development Consultant and author, says, "A couple of the nonverbal things we find women doing are sitting back from the table, and being surrounded by their stuff," she says. "Nonverbally, our research has shown that men, when they see us walking into a meeting and we've got four different bags and fifty different things and a notepad and a workbook, they see us as carrying in baggage." I would add that entering a meeting with a hot mess of stuff gives the impression (to everyone in the room) of not being in control, maybe being a little scattered.



"If I'm talking I usually take up space. I take up space with my hands. I take up space with leaning in."

Nina Richardson
Silicon Labs
Board Member

Be Confident.

Continued...

Of course, the way we talk can convince people that we're confident—or not. Previously, Cindy mentioned the annoying habit of “uptalk,” where sentences that should be statements are turned into questions with that vocal lilt at the end. If you sound like you're questioning your own message, who's going to believe it? Our advice to women is, “Just say no to uptalk.”

Another common vocal mistake is talking too fast. Listeners will likely interpret warp speed delivery as the presenter being nervous or not caring so much about being understood. The simple act of slowing down our speech, particularly when we want to drive home a point, makes a huge difference in projecting confidence—not to mention allowing people to understand what the heck we're saying. I love the way Dr. Bindu Garapaty, Associate Director at Gilead Sciences, nails it: “Speaking slowly means that I deserve this space. I deserve this time to communicate.”

When asked what advice she would give professional women, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright replied, “Learn to interrupt.” I couldn't agree more, and so when Shannon Brayton, Chief Marketing Officer for LinkedIn, speaks about the idea of finding “on-ramps” into conversations, I'm intrigued. In describing discussions with women she mentors, she says, “We talk about looking for on-ramps into the conversation. So, finding phrases that allow you to get into the conversation, in a way that you're comfortable with.” She cites examples like, “Have we ever thought about?”, “Tell me more. I'd like to know more about that”, or “I wasn't here when that discussion happened, so I'd like to get more context.” She suggests “looking for phrases that are on-ramps into conversations and pick the five that are really comfortable for you, and try to use one in every meeting you go to in a day.” One of my favorites is, “We have discussed X project. Here's what I would add...”



*“Own your personality.
Be strong, be powerful in
your space. So stand up
straight, make eye contact,
project your voice, modulate
your voice, hold the
attention of the people.”*

*Rajani Shailender,
Vice President, Concentrix
Catalyst*

Be Confident.

Continued...

On the flip side of learning to speak up, is the fine art of listening. Perhaps there is no higher form of confidence than being willing to listen to others, to make space for their ideas or arguments, to strive to understand where they're coming from. "Sometimes the best possible communication skill you can have is the ability to truly listen and ensure that you're paying attention to what's happening around you, and not stuck up in your head about what you're going to say," Cindy observes.

Being clear and confident communicators can have a powerful effect in our professional lives. But the real transformation comes when we take things one step further, and become courageous.



"Executive presence comes when you have a mastery of the content, the domain space that you're talking about. You have confidence in the way that you talk about it. You have the skill to respectfully engage all the levels around you and you can lead conversations."

*Colleen Berube,
Silicon Valley executive*

Be Courageous.

The extraordinary experience of interviewing all of these strong, passionate women led us, in the end, to the idea of courage. Their collected wisdom turns out to be not just a confirmation of how to become a better presenter or keynote speaker. Rather, it touches on almost all aspects of women's professional lives, from articulating our career goals to delivering persuasive data, asking for a promotion, or passing on our best advice to people we mentor. Running like a silver ribbon through all of it, is courage.

First, there's the courage to be genuine, to be who we are. "One of the things that make people good leaders is being their authentic selves," notes Lynne Zaledonis, Senior Director of Product Marketing for Salesforce. "I'm not afraid to show emotion in meetings, I'm not afraid to be sympathetic, or be understanding, or be a listener, or care a lot about people's personal lives and their well-being. And I think, while they can be stereotyped as women's traits, they made me very successful as a leader, and make people feel valued and want to get behind the programs, or projects, or initiatives we're doing."

Then there's the courage to take credit for our successes. I love what Cindy Solomon, Leadership Development Consultant and author, says about it: "Here are the magic two words that will help every woman do better about owning their success: Just say, 'Thank you.' That's it. Then feel free to acknowledge the team, and more appropriately, congratulate the team and yourself because the team helped you get there. But own the success: 'Thank you, I feel like the project went really well, and the team did an outstanding job alongside me.'"

The courage to accept and learn from failure was another point many of the women brought up. "I like to tell younger people, I cried in a bathroom stall several times, because I think that makes it very real for people, that even at my level, you can have your confidence rattled,"



"There's a myth about courage, that courage is about fearlessness. It's really not. For most of us, courage is in those everyday actions. There's a wonderful quote by Rollo May that says, courage is not the absence of fear; rather, it's the ability to move ahead in spite of your fear."

*Cindy Solomon,
Leadership Development
Consultant and author*

Be Courageous.

Continued...

Lynne says. "But I figured it out, I leaned on mentors, I took on side projects, I asked for assistance, I asked more questions, because it was sink or swim, and I figured it out. And darn if it doesn't feel so much better to be in this role having earned it, than to having come in and have it be easy."

Of course the old adage, "No pain, no gain" is true; and that is to say, women who are courageous enough to take risks, to stretch themselves in their careers, have a better chance at doing great things. "I tell people to take a job where you own P&L if you ever want to be a C-suite executive," advises Nina Richardson, Silicon Labs Board Member. "But most of the time, it's trying the harder thing. Taking the different route. Doing something a little bit different. Pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone. Then you find that you look back, and you're amazed at where your career's taken you over that time."

Being courageous is so much easier when we don't try to do it all alone, when we're willing to ask for help. Lynne talks about the importance of building a personal board of directors. "We talk a lot about how you need a mentor, you need an advisor, but I think you need all of the above. And building this army of people who are behind you every step of the way becomes very important early in your career," she says. "And what I mean by building a board of directors is finding a group of individuals, of all different levels in their careers, all different levels of engagement with you, male, female, different roles within the company, so that you know who to turn to when you have to make difficult decisions."



"I think the onus of making it happen for yourself is with you, because nobody else is going to help you as much as you can help yourself."

Rajani Shailender,
Vice President, Concentrix
Catalyst

Be Courageous.

Continued...

Maybe, then, the most important and courageous thing we professional women can do is to spread the courage around. To guide and support each other with the philosophy that says, "We are stronger, smarter and more courageous together." Not to put too fine—or brutally blunt—a point on it, but one of my favorite quotes on the subject is from former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

Nina subscribes to the what-goes-around-comes-around school. "Karma is incredibly important, and it's really easy to do some small things for people all of the time," she explains. "Then you never have to actually say, 'Well, I did this for you. Will you do this for me?' Because if you started and looked from a career standpoint of treating people with respect, doing whatever you can to support somebody else, being there when they need something, you'll be surprised at how people show up when you need them to be there."



"It's very typical that women do not sing their praises enough, and underestimate the contributions that they have; or they will often attribute it to a team."

*Lynne Zaledonis, Senior
Director of Product
Marketing, Salesforce*



Shine a Light

At a recent *Confident Speaking for Women* workshop, there was a team of women and their manager in attendance. During an exercise where we ask participants to prepare and deliver a business “ask,” each woman on this team stood up and very effectively directed a real-life budget request to their manager. Previously, none of these women felt courageous enough, or maybe just didn’t have the skills to deliver, such a high-risk request in the workplace; so at first, their manager was taken aback. But after the third woman made her pitch, the manager said, “Well, if this is how our conversations are going to go in the future, we’re going to get a lot done!”

Indeed. And there is a lot to be done. Like no other time in history, women are poised to stand up, make their voices heard, contribute to the dialogue, and make a difference in industries, disciplines, cities and villages around the world. But first, we have to get out of our own way. We have to develop the skills needed to become authentic, confident, influential communicators. We need to be willing to ask for help along the way, and, as Rajani so beautifully said, “Shine a light on each other’s successes.”

Your turn to shine. Give yourself and your team the gift of the circle:
Confident Speaking for Women.

Contact us to register for an upcoming workshop.
650-631-8459 • info@powerspeaking.com

Be Clear. Be Confident. Be Courageous.

Thank You!

We would like to offer our sincere thanks to all of the women who gave us their time and wisdom in the development of *Confident Speaking for Women* and *Circles of Light: Women's Wisdom*.



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OTHER WOMEN INTERVIEWED

Sharon Black, President of Strategic Accounts, Robert Half International

Carla Boragno, VP, Site Services, Genentech, Inc.

Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, 18th District, California

Sheila Jordan, CIO, Symantec

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