



THE WAR WITHIN

Conquer self-defeating behaviors of women speakers
by Deborah Shames

In her new book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* author Sheryl Sandberg makes a strong case why so few positions of economic and political power are held by women. Her premise is that women undermine their own cause and tend to view their success as fraudulent. As COO of Facebook, she also observes that women misunderstand how to cultivate useful relationships with their superiors.

I would add that women also sabotage their success through their communications and presentations. As co-founder of Eloqui, my partner David Booth and I have coached and trained hundreds of female executives at companies as large as Mattel, Amgen and TD Ameritrade, to mid-sized law, accounting, financial and insurance firms. And as a former film director more comfortable working behind the scenes, I understand what holds women back and how difficult it is to change long-standing behaviors.

Following are the top five ways I see women exhibit self-defeating behaviors when speaking in public, and how to correct them.

1. **Striving for Perfection:** Being an Expert is Life-Threatening

When I was in college, other students borrowed my notes. They were not only thorough, but carefully printed. If they were too messy, I would re-copy them at home. Similar to many women, I was striving for perfection, rather than learning the concepts introduced in class. I also wanted to be liked and accepted.

I see the same issue at play with women speakers. When we come into a company to conduct trainings, women often ask us to make them more *polished*, *refined* or *perfect*. We tell our clients they're heading in the wrong direction. Being perfect does not create connections with an audience. It distances a speaker. Better to be rough around the edges and natural, than overly polished. The most successful speakers understand their job is to persuade, rather than educate their audience, client or customer.

We were brought into an international pharmaceutical company to coach an exec (we'll call her Linda) who had recently hired a speechwriter for an important keynote. Linda rehearsed her content until she had it down perfectly. She told us, *I nailed it*. Yet the comments she received were lukewarm, while the executive who followed her was given exceptional marks. Linda was frustrated and confused, complaining that *he winged it!*

We told her why. The audience believed the male exec was doing his best to connect with them. He didn't need to write out, memorize or have every word perfectly scripted. Unless you're a trained actor, the sound and cadence of your voice delivering a memorized text will be stilted. Too many women believe they need to be more formal and authoritative, in order to be taken seriously. Yet most successful men display an easy, laid back confidence. They understand being genuine and conversational is better received by an audience than perfection.

I believe the reason women strive for perfection is fear-based. We desperately want to do well. Be the good girl. And make our (fill in the blank—colleagues, family, kids) proud. In my experience, women's biggest fear is being found out for something we're not, which interestingly enough is the clinical definition of Glossophobia or Stage Fright. We are so afraid that someone will ask us a question we can't answer, or that we're not a qualified Expert, that we refuse to speak in public. Countless times, a female client has told me: *I've been asked to speak at our conference (or moderate a panel, or join a networking group) but I'm going to turn it down.* Yet speaking at these venues is the best way to advance our careers and be seen as the *go-to* person in our field!

And when women do agree to speak, I see them over-prepare, write out and memorize or read their talks. They may be boring, but at least they're detailed and thorough. News flash! No successful executive has enough time for this level of prep! Instead, construct an outline with key words and phrases that you can refer to. Think of it as your GPS system that will keep you on track.

And rather than striving to be the Expert, pick a more engaging, interactive Role. Choose to be the Seasoned Veteran, Visionary or Facilitator. Like any good actor, send the Motivator out to speak to the audience. Roles are not only a great editing device (you don't need to know everything about a topic before speaking on it), but leave you less vulnerable. Why? Because you're not sending in Sandra—you're sending the Seasoned Veteran, who has the battle scars to support her position... or the Facilitator, who draws out the opinions of others.

And while you're at it, don't leave yourself or your perspective out of your talk. Perhaps you were taught to be objective, or speak in the third person. *Put yourself back in.* "I" statements not only draw in an audience, but they also reduce anxiety, because you always know where *you* stand on a topic.

2. **Cruel Self-Monitor:** The Critic in your Head

Cynthia runs a successful Marketing and PR firm. She also leads a business group for high level professionals. However, Cynthia is always second-guessing her choices. Although she thinks it doesn't show, she's wrong. In the course of normal conversation, Cynthia speaks at lightning speed and her thinking is clear and logical. But in front of an audience, Cynthia repeats phrases, peppers her speech with *umms* and *ahhs*, and doesn't sound nearly as dynamic as she is.

Women, much more than men, second-guess their decisions. They also feel the audience is judging them—and it ain't positive. That nasty internal critic rattles on incessantly with statements like *what made you think you could do this? Or, they're bored, isn't it obvious? Or, they're waiting for you to fail.*

The result is we include discourse particles (e.g. *umms, just, like, you know*) instead of pausing. We repeat phrases, and apologize. We can appear distracted, because we are. Like texting and driving, no one can do two things at once. Since a speaker cannot connect with the audience and self-monitor, the speaking suffers.

The solution is to focus out on the audience, not the critic in your head. Tell yourself, *they need what I have to deliver* and relate what you know and have learned the hard way. Turn off the critical voice. Have one clear intention and whenever you need to, remind yourself of what you're there to achieve— and that you won't let anything interfere with achieving your goal.

3. **Playing it Safe:** Same Actions = Same Results

Women are inherently great storytellers and communicators. We have no problem in one-on-one conversations, asking questions and typically being great listeners.

But something happens when we're in front of an audience, or in a meeting or pitch when a lot is on the line. Our mouth goes dry; our heart races; we forget what we wanted to say and can feel like a bug trapped under glass. Worse still, our comments become generic. We ramble. Or we don't speak up at all, for fear of making a mistake. Just like Sheryl Sandberg noted, if we think our success is fraudulent-- why would we want to inject our opinions? And what if someone disagrees with us?

However, when we don't take a stand, men see us as weak and easily derailed. Without taking risks, we limit our potential. Men understand it is better to be respected than liked. Women are still concerned about being liked. And by leaving our perspective out of presentations, we don't do justice to ourselves, or the content.

4. **Impression Management:** Are you Auditioning to be the Weather Girl?

The latest studies show that 65 to 80% of the import of any message is delivered non-verbally. Audiences base their judgment on your physical posture, pacing, the pitch of your voice and eye contact. Most women tell me, *If I can only get the words just right, I'll be successful*. Not true. What's equally as important is the impression we have of you, especially the conviction with which you express your ideas.

Ruth leads a regional association, and is often asked to kick off a meeting, present an award to a deserving recipient, or recruit potential members. Yet, Ruth stands with her legs crossed and looks down at the floor, rather than making eye contact with the audience. She also uses upward inflections at the end of her phrases. All of these 'tells' show insecurity, and makes the audience feel bad for Ruth, instead of supporting her.

We coached Ruth to become physically available, stand with her feet shoulder-width apart and arms at her sides. We recommended she look in a mirror and make sure nothing was covered up, and her back was straight. This physically neutral posture allows Ruth to gesture naturally, breathe, and appear open and inviting. Then we coached her to put downward inflections at the end of her sentences. And we encouraged Ruth to slow down, which allows her to think on her feet and make eye contact around the room.

There is more to influencing an audience's impression than our physical posture and gestures. Some women are not anxious in front of a room. They understand how to connect with an audience. And they really know their material. Joyce is an exceptional executive who has worked her way up the ladder at a major toy company. But Joyce has hit her head on the glass ceiling. Rather than promoting Joyce to the position she deserves, the Head of Sales has bypassed her for one of his male colleagues.

Over the years, we've counseled Joyce on everything from intention and structure, to strategy and effective PowerPoint. Being very determined, she's given 110% and seriously focused on her advancement. But Joyce has one blind spot. She had her colors done, and applied what she learned by dressing in pastels and feminine, frilly styles. She also wears her hair long. The result is that Joyce doesn't *look* like a leader.

Women executives need to dress the part. For examples, actors are selfish. When they audition, or represent a company as their spokesperson, they want all the attention to go to their face, not to a glittery necklace, earrings, scarf, tie or any distraction. Keep it simple. Avoid busy patterns. Wear the appropriate clothing for the job. You want your words to be memorable-- not your accessories or heaven forbid, your cleavage!

5. **No Juice:** Once again, without feeling

Solid rehearsal techniques are the fast track to success. The key is finding the balance between 'winging it'—don't, and over-rehearsing. An actor would never appear on stage without knowing their lines. Why do we think it's any different for a speaker?

Ann is the CEO of a national non-profit based in LA. Every year, she delivers the keynote at their fundraising gala. Celebrities and wealthy donors attend the event, so a lot is riding on Ann's speech. Ann would write out and rehearse her remarks over and over, and also put her text on a teleprompter. Unfortunately, the over-rehearsal made her speech *sound* canned, memorized and scripted.

We encouraged Ann to outline her talk. She was hesitant. So much was riding on her words. Then Ann attended an Eloqui workshop, along with other business leaders and CEOs. She experimented with her content, added her perspective (her father had died of the disease) and incorporated movement. We taught her performance techniques: how to mix up the wording and phrasing each time she rehearsed to keep the content fresh and lively. But the final piece—simply following an outline was her greatest hurdle.

Step #1. Ann delivered a shortened version of her speech, in outline form, to the other participants at the workshop. She received applause and favorable comments. But would the encouraging remarks be enough to change Ann's behavior at the gala? David and I attended the event. As Ann took the stage, we held our breath. As she did every year, Ann went behind the podium and then, instead of speaking, walked to the center of the stage. I still get goose bumps when I remember that moment.

Ann launched into a 20-minute speech without notes or the teleprompter. When she finished, the room exploded in applause and she received a standing ovation. But my favorite line was when the emcee who followed her said *I don't know how she did it. I don't get out of bed in the morning without a prompter telling me what to say.*

What Ann realized is that rehearsing an outline and knowing the direction of where she wanted to go was far more important than getting every word just right. Like Ann, you didn't become proficient in your career overnight. The same is true for public speaking. I have yet to meet a woman or man who was born a great speaker. Mastery takes tools, techniques and safety nets. To reduce your anxiety, practice in low-ante venues, where little is riding on the outcome. Take risks. Commit to the process. And most of all, believe in yourself.