



# YOU ARE A BRILLIANT WOMAN

Seven things women should remember about public speaking.

By Tara Sophia Mohr

**You are brilliant.**

Your ideas? Incredible. Your questions? Insightful. Your critiques of the status quo? Right on.

I keep meeting brilliant women like you, with compelling ideas to contribute, important businesses and organizations to build, and provocative questions to share. But so often, the way you communicate fails to command power. You equivocate, apologize and look away as you speak.

I do this too. We subtly undermine ourselves with our words and body

Of course you have questions. There is nothing surprising about it.

“In Toastmasters, we call these words, like ‘just’ or ‘actually,’ ‘verbal garbage,’” says Jana Barnhill, who served as Toastmasters International President in 2008–2009. “Many women don’t realize how those words sabotage their speaking.”

**3. Don’t tell people why the words you are about to say are likely to be wrong.** Avoid starting sentences with phrases such as, “I haven’t re-

**4. Don’t tell us you are going to “take only a minute”** to say

something. Often, in presentations or meetings, I hear women say, “I’d like to ask you to take just a minute to consider this idea” or “Now, I’m going to take a few minutes to tell you about our product.” Think about how much stronger it sounds to simply say, “I’d like to tell you about our product.”

Go ahead and only take a minute, if that’s appropriate, but skip using the phrase “just a minute” in a talk or presentation. It sounds apologetic and implies that you don’t think what you are about to say is worthy of time and attention.

**5. Don’t make your sentences**

**sound like questions.** Women often raise the pitch of their voice at the end of a sentence, making it sound like a question. Listen to your own language and that of women around you, and you are likely to notice this everywhere. Unsurprisingly, speaking a statement like a question diminishes its power.

Pam Fox Rollin, executive coach and author of *42 Rules for Your New Leadership Role*, says, “When I coach women executives, we look at how they can communicate more influentially. We may wish otherwise, but human brains are not wired to accept guidance from wispy, hurried, question-inflected voices.”

Make statements sound like statements — drop your tone lower at the end.

“Whether the topic is apps, appeals or appraisals, speakers must try to create an unforgettable audience experience.”

language. As a result, our ideas do not have the impact they could. Here are seven ways you might be undermining yourself — and seven ways to stop.

**1. Drop the “just.”** Avoid using phrases like “I’m just wondering ...,” “I just think ...,” and “I just want to add ...” The word “just” demeans what you have to say. It shrinks your power. It is time to say goodbye to the “justs.”

**2. While you are at it, drop the “actually.”** “I actually have a question.” “I actually want to add something.” “Actually” communicates a sense of surprise that you have something to say. Of course you want to add something.

searched this much but ...”; “I’m just thinking off the top of my head but ...”; “You’ve clearly been studying this longer than I have, but ...”

We use these kinds of qualifiers for several reasons. We do not want to appear arrogant. We are not completely sure about what we are saying. We fear being wrong, so we buffer the sting of a critical response by saying up front, “I’m not totally standing behind what I am about to say, but ...” Then, no one has the chance to say back, “Well, I know you strongly believe this, but I entirely disagree.”

No matter what the reason, this takes away from the power of your voice. It’s time to change the habit.

## ADVICE FROM FEMALE PIPS

More than 25 years ago, Helen Blanchard became Toastmasters International's first female International President. Since then, five more women have held that position, and more than half of the organization's 270,000 members are female.

Here are some time-tested tips from female past International Presidents to help all women in business:

- ▶ **Accept challenges.** "I accepted challenges that made me reach far beyond my comfort zone, time and again," said Helen Blanchard (1985–1986) in her memoir, *Breaking the Ice*. By going the extra mile and taking the time to prepare for challenges, Blanchard says you will earn the confidence of supervisors and likely land that promotion you've been looking for.
- ▶ **Work with change.** "Dramatic changes are taking place throughout the world," notes Pauline Shirley (1994–1995). "These changes are all-encompassing and happen at a more rapid pace than ever. It is essential that we constantly adjust to these changes." Shirley's advice: "In everything you do, strive to make a change for the better!"
- ▶ **Be a team player.** Other people's strengths will balance your weaknesses. Good communication is crucial. "Too often we work apart rather than together," said the late Jo Anna McWilliams (2000–2001). "A team can work more effectively and accomplish something much bigger than a group of the same individuals working on their own. Effectiveness comes from the diversity of skills and individual personalities of others."
- ▶ **Face your fears and find courage.** "We, as women, are just as intelligent, just as capable, just as worthy as men to be successful in business," says Jana Barnhill (2008–2009). "We just have to fight a little harder. In order to do that, we must have the courage, and the skill, to speak up. Don't let a lack of confidence keep you from your dreams!"
- ▶ **Be an active listener.** "To achieve your own personal brand of greatness and become an effective leader, you must listen, using your whole body," says Pat Johnson (2010–2011). "We need to listen to what someone says, and then we need to engage our brains to think about our response before speaking."

**6. Don't substitute a question for a statement.** You might think you are "suggesting" increasing the marketing budget by asking, "What about increasing the marketing budget?" in a meeting, but your colleagues aren't likely to hear an opinion (and certainly not a well-thought-out opinion) in your question. When you have something to say, do not couch it in a question.

Sometimes, of course, there are strategic reasons to use a question rather than a statement: to gently introduce an idea to a group that is likely to be resistant to it, for example. But women often turn to questions rather than statements because we are avoiding conflict, avoiding visibility and avoiding claiming power. We use questions because we

have heard old stories about it being dangerous or inappropriate to state our ideas definitively, and we can't see how sharing our perspective boldly and directly could actually hugely benefit our careers. It's time to let the old stories go.

**7. Punctuate and pause.** Imagine sitting across a table listening to a woman share this: "*We are working hard on this, because we want to get the business up and running by 2013, specifically April 2013, which is the target date, and we are very optimistic that with the right financing we can get there, and so that is why I've been approaching different investors every day.*"

You know this type of communication: Clauses get piled on top of one another, the speaker interrupting her own thoughts with digressions.

When we don't feel we have the right to take up space in a meeting or conversation, or when we are nervous, we tend to rush, and never leave a moment without words. Brief pauses between your sentences connote confidence and a sense of comfort in the role of speaker. Pauses allow the listener to absorb what you are saying and give you a moment to gather a deep breath and collect your thoughts.

How does it feel, in contrast, to imagine listening to this: "*We are working hard on this. We want to get the business up and running by April 2013. We are very optimistic that with the right financing we can get there. I am approaching different investors every day.*"

All that has changed is punctuation, but the second speaker sounds calmer and more on top of her plan. Punctuate and pause.

### How to Make Change

How do you begin changing your speech? Start by increasing your awareness of the unhelpful speech patterns you currently use and be mindful of your intention to speak differently.



### Focus on one habit at a time.

Executive communication-skills trainer Jeanne Marie Grumet recommends that you make changes to your speech patterns one at a time. Focus on one that stands out to you. For example, for a few weeks you might work on noticing when you use a question rather than a statement when you have an opinion to share. Then work on changing that. Next you might shift to noticing your “justs” and eliminating them.

**Practice, with feedback.** Barnhill stresses the importance of practice: “You cannot learn the art of speaking by reading a book about it. The only way to reach a high level of skill is through practice — but the right kind of practice — practice with appropriate feedback. Speaking practice must be followed with

constructive feedback about what you are doing well and what you need to do to make changes.”

Fox Rollin, executive coach and author, also believes feedback is essential to improving communication skills. She tells of one of her clients — a divisional CFO — who struggled with being taken seriously. “Her breathy, question-inflected voice came across poorly, especially on conference calls. Yet she had trouble evaluating her own voice. She asked a good colleague to be her ‘inflection buddy’ and let her know via chat and after-meeting feedback when she was on- and off-track in communicating powerfully. This made a huge difference for her in figuring out what works.”

**Keep being yourself.** Women have unique ways of communicating — ways that tend to be more

collaborative, consensus building and inviting. These new habits are not about adopting an authoritative communication style that doesn’t sit right with you in your heart. They are about giving up the self-diminishing patterns that stem from being afraid of power or from believing our inner critic, and as a result, sharing our ideas tentatively.

As Fox Rollin puts it, “Be yourself ... your most grounded, confident, influential self.” **T**

**Tara Sophia Mohr** is a women’s leadership and well-being expert, and creator of “10 Rules for Brilliant Women,” as well as the global Playing Big leadership program for women. Visit [taramohr.com](http://taramohr.com) to learn more.



## Become a Certified SpeakersTrainingCamp® Instructor

*Turn your talent and passion for speaking  
into a dream job*

- Provide training for companies, US & International
- Deliver public workshops • Coach individuals

Turn your passion for speaking into a business. Be your own boss. Set your own schedule and fees. Our three-day training program will certify you to deliver the SpeakersTrainingCamp® workshop, the same top-rated program chosen by Fortune 500 companies for over 25 years. You will be prepared to teach others how to speak and present—businesses, organizations, individuals. We provide the training, the materials, and the roadmap to your success.



**Sue Gaulke**

Founder, SpeakersTrainingCamp®  
President, Successworks



## SpeakersTrainingCamp®

Toastmaster discounts – U.S. and International

**Contact Us Today!**

[info@successworksusa.com](mailto:info@successworksusa.com)

**1-800-473-1969**

[www.successworksusa.com](http://www.successworksusa.com)