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Speak up: Finding Your Authentic Voice

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In leadership training and counseling and as a practicing lawyer, I am frequently asked how to speak up without being labeled as overly aggressive, bossy or other (even worse) epithets. As women, we walk a fine line between being perceived as too aggressive and shrill or too weak and whiny. In either circumstance, we are deemed ineffective.

How can you make oral presentations with authority? There are no easy answers. There is no one formula for success. And, different circumstances require different sensitivities and approaches. I do have several suggestions.

Remember, there is a difference between assertiveness and aggressiveness. As lawyers, we are required to be advocates on behalf of our clients. To be assertive is to stand firm in one's position and support it with appropriate authority and/or evidence; to be aggressive is to force your position on others. Perceptions will vary, depending upon the circumstances and the perspectives of those present. While there may be a very few occasions where it is essential to be aggressive, learning to speak with authority is a key quality of a successful advocate.

Be yourself. To be genuine and authentic you have to know yourself, what style works for you and what does not. As a young associate, I worked with a partner who would glare at witnesses (and sometimes associates) at depositions and trials in a most intimidating manner. I knew that style would never work for me. On the other hand, if you see something that you can incorporate without changing your style, do so. For example, I tend to be direct and to the point, but I have learned that not everyone receives direct feedback well. As a result, I have learned to soften my presentation when circumstances require it.

Listen and observe. You can learn from listening to and observing your partners, associates, colleagues, clients and others. Whose styles resonate the most with you? Who are most persuasive. Who has habits that detract or distract from their presentations. If you conclude that certain colleagues are particularly effective speakers, consider asking them to help you improve your oral presentations. There are many additional benefits from becoming a good listener. Often we are so busy thinking of we want to say, that we fail to listen to others and miss important opportunities.

Plan, prepare and practice. Whether you are attending a meeting, taking a deposition or negotiating a business issue, plan, prepare and practice. Identify your goals and the messages that support your goals. You might write out one or more

scenarios. At the very least, have a set of bullet points to keep your presentation focused. Practice your presentation. Record it or, if possible video-tape it. What oral or physical habits do you hear and see that detract from your message? Do you include several "um's" in every sentence? Practice until you eliminate distractions.

Avoid negative thoughts and negative selftalk. Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can, or if you think you can't, you are probably right." Remember the "Little Train that Could" who kept repeating "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can"? Listen to your thinking. You will undoubtedly be surprised at the number of times you criticize yourself. We are so much harsher on ourselves than we are to others. When you listen to your self-talk and identify negativity, affirmatively reject the negative and replace it with a positive. For example, if you are thinking, "they will not listen to me," replace that thought with: "What I have to say will be so well prepared and so compelling that they will listen to me."

Have confidence in your ability to communicate. Do not begin with an apology, or by saying "I think" or "I feel." Even if you feel uncertain under the circumstances, go for your goal. While your confidence will increase with preparation and experience, if you feel shaky, see yourself as confidently stating your position and fake it until you make it.

Be flexible, patient and kind to yourself as you learn. If your plan does not work, be flexible. If an objection to a question is sustained or an idea is rejected out of hand, do not be deterred. As a partner once said to me, there is the deposition that you prepared, the deposition that you took and the deposition that you wish you took. You will learn and improve with experience.

Humor. Remember not to take yourself seriously. While humor often does not work in presentations, the ability to laugh at yourself as you progress makes life much more pleasant.

Take risks. Unless you are willing to take risks, you cannot grow and learn. Identify the next step to progress in your career and decide how best to get there.

Note your successes. We tend to remember our errors and forget our achievements. Keep a list of your successes, whether it is arguing a motion, presenting a legal theory to your team or taking a deposition, write down your successes. It will give you security as you progress in your career.

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