



THE HUMPHREY
GROUP INC.

STRONG WORDS

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STRONG WORDS

Good morning. I am delighted to be here and honoured to have so many of you here for this final event in the Gift of Wisdom Series.

My subject today is “strong words.” I’ll begin by sharing a personal story. When I was very young, I used few words. Certainly not strong ones. That’s because I was shy. But something drove me to overcome this shyness, and learn to speak forcefully. There was a stronger spirit in me than I was giving voice to...a conviction that I had more to offer.

At the age of 12 I began playing the violin. That instrument gave me a feeling of expressiveness. There was magic in being able to speak through the instrument. I remember standing in front of an audience for my first concert. When I finished, there was a hush in the room, and I had a profound feeling of what it felt like to be heard.

Eventually I moved from music to words as a means of expressing myself. My passion for communicating translated itself into a passion for words. I became a speechwriter and executive coach. Today as President of The Humphrey Group I speak my mind quite openly to corporate CEOs and their teams. I always tell them that they’re paying for my honesty and my advice. And that’s what I give them. Plenty of it!

I tell you this story because it shows that I didn’t start out in life using strong words. Most of us don’t. But gradually I gained a voice, and so can we all. I know you wouldn’t be here today if you didn’t want to speak with

strong words. Some women, I know, have achieved this strength. They speak with confidence and display impressive skills. They've worked hard to reach that level.

But not everyone is there yet. We in The Humphrey Group have worked with hundreds of corporate and professional women over the past decade, and we hear the same patterns of speech. The power women want and deserve is not present in the scripts they create for themselves.

So my message today is this: women must rewrite their scripts if they want to be perceived as strong leaders. And by "scripts" I don't mean simply those formal speeches and presentations we write. I mean more broadly the way we speak in every encounter—from phone calls to town halls, from elevator chats to client encounters.

Let me start by looking at the problem. Then I'll talk about how women can rewrite their lines so these scripts are stronger and more powerful.

THE WEAK SCRIPTS WE WRITE

I listen very closely to the way women and men speak, and I can tell you that the scripts women deliver every day do not serve them well.

Our lessons in scripting begin very early. As infants, we're given permission to cry while boys are not. As we grow up, we're encouraged to be "nice" and "helpful," and unthreatening. We're taught to minimize our intellectual strengths and our achievements. In marriage and careers, we're encouraged to play a supporting role.

The result? Women consistently and continuously script themselves in ways that undermine and reduce their power. I hear over and over again from female clients that they don't want to threaten anyone, be too aggressive, or be too strong. Instead, they seek to build others up and put themselves down—often in the same breath! Their everyday business scripts reflect this deliberate if unconscious effort to minimize themselves. Here are three ways we undercut ourselves in our scripts.

First, women cast themselves as weak characters. We allow others to speak out at meetings, while we nod our heads in agreement—playing the offstage role. And we leave thinking, “I had those same ideas. Why did I let someone else speak out and get the credit?”

When we do speak, we undercut ourselves. For example, women often call attention to their physical flaws, or what they think are their physical flaws. I attended a talk and the speaker, a senior woman, got up and explained that she had put on a suit that morning that was too large, searched for a belt and found one that wasn't that attractive. Sure enough, we looked and saw that she wasn't dressed for success. Often when we videotape women in our courses, we hear the same things from them: “Look how fat I am,” “My hair is a mess,” “That outfit doesn't suit me.” Why do we call attention to our age, our weight, our flaws?

And why in our scripts do we shun success? I attended a meeting with several top women in a corporation. As they introduced themselves, they each apologized for the fact that they had made it to the top. One said: “I never expected to be a senior vice president when I came here.” Another remarked: “I don't know how I got to this level.” And

a third confided: "My title may sound impressive, but my job isn't!" With words like these we cast ourselves in minor parts, even when others have given us leading roles.

The second characteristic of our weak scripts is that they emphasize information rather than argument. Women tend to focus on detail. We often derive our sense of self worth by completing tasks rather than putting forth ideas. We take it as a compliment when our bosses say, "If you want a job to get done, give it to a woman!" We feel that in doing things for others, we shield ourselves from criticism. If a woman says to her boss, "I completed this project successfully" she can expect praise. But if she puts forward an idea to her boss or peers, especially a controversial one, she leaves herself open to criticism. And we don't like to be criticized!

Women bring this informational approach to discussions, meetings and memos. We tend to present facts and statistics—items that brook no argument. "Our results were down 33 percent" is much less risky for a woman than "our results fell sharply—and I consider that unacceptable." Because of our commitment to getting jobs done, many women become frustrated during strategy discussions. I have clients who come to me and say: "The meeting was awful. All I wanted to do was get approval for my project, while the men wanted a high-level discussion about the direction the organization was heading."

Or as one female executive put it: "Men spend lots of time speaking in meetings, never feel rushed, and act as though they own the room. Yet they don't do the good work I do. I'm the one with the results."

Our downfall is that even as we move into higher positions, we behave as we did in more junior jobs. As workers! Not leaders. Our scripts lack messages, and we're reluctant to put forth and defend our ideas.

The third characteristic of our weak scripts is our language patterns, which betray a lack of strength. We undercut ourselves in many ways.

To begin with, we often ask permission to speak. For example, we say, "Do you mind if I add something," rather than just saying it. The idea of adding on to what others have said casts us as subordinates.

We're more likely to ask questions than to make assertions. We say, "These numbers are right, aren't they?" when we mean they *are* right. One executive said to her staff member: "Are you comfortable that the audience will be able to relate to those particular messages in your presentation?" What she should have said is, "The audience ain't going to get it!"

We frequently use modifiers that undercut our power. I call them mincing modifiers. We say *I'd just like to say something...or I'm a bit concerned. Or, I only want to, or maybe we should. Or perhaps.* These mincing modifiers make us sound tentative and unsure of ourselves.

Women also use weak verbs. Too often we say, "*I think there is something we can learn,*" rather than, "*I'm confident*" or "*I know there is something we can learn.*" We say, "*I'll try to*" and "*I'll attempt to*" far too often. Women say, "*I'm not sure,*" even when they are sure.

We weaken our verbs even more when we are asking someone to do something. For example, a female manager, role-playing a conversation with her subordinate, was asking her to commit to a deadline. She used prefatory statements like “Maybe you could...” or “Do you think it would be possible for you to...” Who comes across as the subordinate?

Women also frequently use qualifiers. Before a statement we often say: “You may already know this, but...” Or, “I’m not sure you’re aware...” Or, “it’s only my opinion,” or “I could be wrong.” Or the one we’ve heard thousands of times: “This is probably a stupid question, but...” Why diminish your credibility? Why introduce your statements with words that encourage others not to take you seriously?

After a strong statement or a request we often pull back. For example, we’ll say: “I want you to work as a team—if you are comfortable with that.” Or, “We can offer you a package...but I’ll have to check on that.” One woman, telling me of her recent promotion, said: “I’ve become an SVP, but it’s no big deal.”

Around the office we spend a lot of time listening to each other. So my assistant has switched from saying to her son: “Please see if you can get the computer fixed, if you have time” to “Fix the computer please.” The day she changed her language was the day the computer got fixed.

We also use emotional words that undermine us—we say, “I feel,” “I trust,” and “I hope.” We also use words of the heart. If you’re thanking your people for a well-done project, don’t say: “With all my heart, I want to thank you. You can’t imagine how grateful I feel.” Just say thank you.

We also apologize too much: “I’m sorry this, I’m sorry that.” We apologize in our voice mail greetings: “I’m sorry I’m not here.” Why should you be; you’ve probably got better things to do, attending this speech, for example. Or, when someone comes around the corner and there is a near collision, who apologizes and steps aside? Typically, the woman.

So our scripts—with their weak roles, messages, and words—undermine our power. They go a long way to explaining why we aren’t heard when we speak.

REWRITE YOUR SCRIPT

What’s the answer? A major rewrite. I’m going to give you three steps you can take to improve your scripts.

Of course, it’s only my opinion. You don’t have to listen to me. It’s just a bit of advice. And stop me at any time if you have questions.

Seriously, if you’re going to speak strongly—there are three things you need to do. And while some of you may already be doing some of them—they’re good things for all of us to keep in mind.

First, create a strong character for yourself. The most important step you can take in rewriting your script is to choose a stronger role. Begin by challenging old assumptions. Focus on persuading your audience, not on fitting into someone’s stereotyped view of women.

Recognize when you are casting yourself that there are new choices—new, more powerful roles for women today. These are parts that didn’t exist until recently.

When I established The Humphrey Group in 1988 there were many fewer women in executive positions. Most of the executives we coached were men.

So when you're deciding what roles to play, look around at some of the very successful women, including those in this room. Use them as role models and mentors.

Create a new "character" for yourself. Rewriting your script in this way can mean rewriting your life...finding a new role to play, a new, more powerful identity.

I have made many major moves in my life—from music, to academia, to the corporate world, to the world of entrepreneurship—all because I felt my inner talents would flourish in the new environments.

Sometimes a new job will encourage you to develop a new persona. But it's more likely that a new script—a bolder approach to the world—will help you land that next promotion.

How do you know when it's time to recast your "character"—change your role? When you're not taken seriously; when you're passed over for a promotion; when you're always given the drudge work. One administrator in the school system said she knew it was time to make a change in her life when she was asked to clean the principal's kitchen.

The second step in creating a stronger script is to ensure you always speak with a message. It doesn't matter if you're having an elevator conversation with your boss, a brief meeting with your direct reports, or making a formal presentation—you need to have a message that organizes your thoughts and focuses what you say.

Having a message allows you to shape an encounter. Studies of business meetings find that the most powerful people are not necessarily the ones who speak the most. Often those who set the tone for the meeting say relatively little. But their comments have force and purpose and others respond to them. They set the agenda.

If you're running a meeting begin with your message. Let everyone know your views about the goals of that gathering. Don't start by going around the room asking people for an update.

And once the meeting is underway, look for opportunities to lead with your thinking. Don't be afraid to modify your ideas if good arguments have been presented. The more you incorporate the suggestions of others, the easier the "buy in" will be. But come back to your message. Give leadership to that meeting. Use your "big idea" to help shape the action plan.

Your ideas should be well thought out and simply put.

Anne Mulcahy, Chairman and CEO of Xerox Corporation, delivered a single, consistent message during the recent hard times at Xerox. Her message to employees was this: "You have a choice to make. Leave Xerox...or roll up your sleeves and get to work saving the company we all love."

It doesn't get much clearer than that. If you're asking for a severance package...know your mind and ask for it. If you're asking for the sale ask for it. Don't be afraid.

Once you state your point of view, be prepared to defend it. Don't fold your tent at the first sign of opposition. Women tend to drop out of conversations too easily. Or they go on the defensive. Or get irritated that people don't see it their way. You needn't be aggressive, but you must be assertive and stand your ground.

I find the biggest single obstacle women have in dealing with objections is that we take them personally. Don't confuse criticism of your ideas with criticism of yourself.

When people interrupt you at meetings, resist the temptation to give way. Margaret Thatcher, when still an opposition politician, was repeatedly interrupted by Prime Minister James Callaghan. She hung in there, continuing to talk for five seconds after the interruption—instead of the normal half-second. So, stay the course.

And stay focused on ideas. The challenge for women is to rise above the “doer” mentality and stop trying to prove that they're efficient, effective or generally good workers.

A willingness to put forward ideas and fight for them is important...But it's not enough. You also need strong words.

The third step in re-drafting your scripts is to choose strong words. I've mentioned the weak language traps women fall into. What you have to do is edit them out of your script. Get rid of:

- *Statements* in which you ask permission to speak.
- *Questions* for which you already have the answers.

- *Mincing modifiers*—like “just,” “only,” “a bit.”
- *Weak verbs* like “I hope,” “I want,” “I need.” And above all “I THINK.”
- *Qualifiers*. If you say something, say it.
- *Emotionalism*.
- *Apology*.

After you’ve edited out these weak words, what’s left? Strong words.

We have many strong words in our minds and hearts. They simply need to be articulated with more frequency and power.

For example, learn to describe what you do with greater power. Talk not about your “job” but about your leadership goals and achievements. Share your vision and your values whenever you can.

Develop a “mantra” that describes your mission or your value. One senior female client at an earlier stage in her career had this as her mantra: “I am the manager of marketing for a global technology corporation.” While others might see this simply as a title, she saw it as a mission that she silently repeated to herself whenever she went into an important meeting. By thinking this way, she eventually became a CEO.

Other strong words are your own name and your company’s name. Whenever you deliver these words, speak them with power. I find too many people gloss over these words.

And if you want to go still further in strengthening your language, try boasting. When we work with female clients we sometimes ask them to boast, to tell fantastic stories about themselves. To explain why they're successful.

And when we prepare clients for job interviews we do the same thing. While it may seem like boasting to them, the reality is never "over the top." It is simple, strong and confident. So, try boasting. It will sound like confidence to everyone else. And it will feel better for you.

CONCLUSION

Today I've given you some powerful ways to rewrite your script. Create a better "character" or role for yourself. Bring forward your message more effectively. Use strong words.

Think about the fact that every time you speak, you have the opportunity to gain power. Or lose it. Which will it be? It's your choice. You're the dramatist. You have the ability to script yourselves. I urge you to think of your script as an expression of your power. I urge you to think about your script as a reality others will believe in. I urge you to create strong scripts with strong words so others believe in you.



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