



THE HUMPHREY
GROUP INC.

TAKING THE STAGE[®]

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TAKING THE STAGE®

Thank you for that kind introduction...talk about pressure. As you know from my introduction, the role of my company is preparing others to speak.

For 12 years, I've been coaching executives. I've reassured them that if they're well prepared, it doesn't matter who's in the audience. It could be their best friends or close business associates. Even their speech coach.

And now the tables are turned. The shoe—or high heel—is on the other foot. Many of our clients have come out to see me speak. Several have told me they wouldn't miss this event for the world.

Talk about pressure. But that's what it means to take the stage. Every time you walk up to that podium, or stand in front of an audience, or meet with a client or boss, there are expectations. Expectations that you'll influence and inspire your listeners.

It's that ability to "take the stage" and lead others, that I'd like to talk about this morning, particularly as it applies to women. My message is this: while we women all too often have been taught not to take the stage, we can and must do so if we want to realize our capacity for leadership.

I'll look first at the reasons many women are uncomfortable in the spotlight. Then using The Humphrey Group's experiences with clients, I'll discuss how you and other women can "take the stage" and stand out.

WHY WOMEN ARE RELUCTANT TO “TAKE THE STAGE”

Traditionally, women have been uncomfortable in the spotlight. Deborah Tannen, author of the book, *Talking From 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power*, notes that girls learn that it is “wrong” to stand out. She remarks: “Boys are expected to put themselves forward, emphasize the qualities that make them look good, and de-emphasize those that would show them in a less favorable light...Girls are expected to be “humble”—not try to take the spotlight, emphasize the ways they are just like everyone else, and de-emphasize ways they are special.” Sound familiar?

It’s unsurprising that if girls are taught not to stand out, when they become women they’re often uncomfortable in the boardroom. One senior executive client, female, told me: “When I speak in a management meeting, I feel constantly rushed, my eyes fly everywhere, I throw anything in, and I look as though I lack self-confidence. People must wonder how I ever made it to Senior Vice-President. The men in room, on the other hand, spend lots of time speaking. They 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.”

This is a person who wanted to change. And I assure you, she has.

Before I discuss solutions, though, let me make clear that I recognize that many women are comfortable in leadership roles. We in The Humphrey Group work with many of them. These leaders serve as models for others who want to improve their abilities and rise in their organizations. They illustrate the principles I’ll discuss. Still,

most women need to “take the stage” more fully than they have. Our socialization has been that strong.

I’d also emphasize that the goal is not to make women conform to a male ideal. As women, we bring valuable qualities. We’re good listeners. We’re empathetic. We tend to be more sensitive to the feelings of those we’re addressing.

But these qualities are not enough. That’s why the focus of my remarks this morning is on taking the stage.

TAKING THE STAGE®

Taking the stage is a metaphor that describes what we, as women managers and executives, need to do: come out of the wings and stand center stage. Let me suggest six steps you can take to achieve this strong leadership presence every time you speak.

The first step is understanding what it means to “take the stage.” Shakespeare wrote that “all the world’s a stage.”

A stage can be a podium, the front of a conference room, a telephone, an elevator, or the entrance to a CEO’s office. Every time you communicate, you’re on stage. When you walk into a room, say ‘this moment is important.’ Don’t just wait for the opportunities to happen—Create them! One of my clients did just that. When she was at her customer’s office, she asked to see the CEO. Soon she found herself standing at the door of the CEO’s office, with two or three minutes to influence him. That was a performance!

Taking the stage begins with an attitude. It starts with the understanding that every single situation is an opportunity to influence, inspire, and motivate people.

The second step in becoming an inspirational leader is developing a deep conviction about the value you bring to an audience. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir observes that women have traditionally seen themselves as the “other” in a relationship. They consider themselves the audience, not the actor. Women are great listeners, great supporters, great at building others up. Certainly, a willingness to listen is a necessary attribute for a leader. But that ability must not inhibit us from assuming a starring role. At those moments when we wish to lead others, we must assume the role of the “self,” and see the audience as the “other.”

To do so means finding within ourselves the confidence to accept that others want to see, hear, and be inspired by us.

Developing this sense of self, in relation to an audience, is challenging. The actors who are consultants in The Humphrey Group, make clear that anxiety is part of every great performance. An actor deals with two things simultaneously. One is nervousness; the other is the desire to come forward. Women have an additional source of anxiety. They have a voice that is shouting in their minds: “Who do you think you are, speaking with authority?” Acknowledge the fear, then say, “I’m still going to speak up, and I’ll do it well.”

Not long ago, I helped prepare a woman who was retiring after 30 years as a deputy minister. Her colleagues were like a family. She confided that she was afraid she

would get emotional and break down when she was speaking. I said “if you break down, the audience will be moved by a sense of sadness, rather than by the power of your vision.” We concluded she must be bold.

She wrote “Be Bold” at the top of each page of her speech. And it worked. Throughout her talk she was strong, and confident. But the emotion was welling up inside, and as she reached the very last word of her speech, she simply couldn’t get it out. Suddenly the emotion came forward and she was speechless. But she had held on, and delivered a remarkable address—some said the best they had ever heard. Her emotion and bold vision created a powerful speech.

The third step in becoming an inspirational leader is creating your character. The traditional parts women sometimes play—little girls, wives, mothers—don’t embody leadership. Yet, women constantly assume these roles. A female vice president was sent to me this week by her boss who said she sounded too “nice.” She had a big job to do, and nobody took her seriously. Women who sound maternal in the board room, “cutsie” at the podium, or perky on the phone need to recast themselves.

Another related tendency is for some women to cast themselves as “characters” who need approval. The words, the tone, the body language and constant smile say: “I want to be loved.” This individual lacks power.

We all assign ourselves parts. My advice: assign yourself the role of a leader. Create this “character” by understanding what it means to be a leader. A leader has vision. A leader has a point of view and is not afraid to express it. A leader must also be centered, totally authentic.

Finally, a leader brings together the best of what we think of as “male” and “female” qualities. A true leader is from both Venus and Mars. Ground yourself in these qualities, and create your “character.”

The fourth step in becoming an inspirational leader is creating a great script. A “script” can be written or it can be in one’s mind. Every time we speak—whether at the podium, at meetings, in one-on-one encounters, or on the phone—we “script” ourselves.

Female managers and executives have a tendency to create scripts that are more passive than they should be. They ask questions rather than making points. They quickly pull back or modify their statements when they encounter disapproval. They chip away at a discussion rather than presenting a sustained point of view.

Let me give you some ideas about how you can create a leader’s script—whether you’re preparing for an impromptu exchange, a formal address, or anything in between.

To begin with, make sure you have a message. Those who work with The Humphrey Group know that our mantra is: “You must always have a message if you want to influence and inspire.” Ask yourself before writing a speech, or before entering the room, “What’s my point?” Be able to state that message in a single, clear sentence. Everything else you say will support that single argument.

And make certain that message positions you as a leader. Make that message positive, even if you’re dealing with a difficult situation. Leaders must take their followers from the present into a better future.

Announce your message with great conviction. We once wrote a speech for a female executive. It began strongly: "My message for you is this..." Alas, when she delivered the speech I heard her say: "If you do take any message away today I think it will be this." My heart fell!

Think out the structure of your presentation. How do you plan to support your argument? Write out that structure on paper or keep it clearly in your mind.

The fifth step builds upon the fourth: to make your script effective, use the language of leadership.

If you're taking the stage, do so with bold clear language. We find in our work that many women have trouble being direct. Introductory phrases like "in my opinion," "as I see it," or "it's only a thought" downplay our ideas. There's too much apologizing and self-correction in the language women use.

When women do express their ideas directly, they often soften the impact. They use weak verbs: "I think," "I will attempt to," "I'm trying to," "I'm not sure." They use qualifiers: "I'd *just* like to review." They use the past tense. For example: "What I *wanted* to talk about today was our priorities." (Instead of "I'd like to talk about our priorities.") They also use emotional language and the language of dependency—talking about "being concerned" or "needing that."

In contrast, listen to the strong words of Margaret Thatcher when she told Britons about the campaign to retake the Falkland Islands: "Now we are present in strength on the Falkland Islands. Our

purpose is to repossess them. We shall carry on until that purpose is accomplished.”

There’s no mistaking her steely resolve. Her sentences are short and to the point. She doesn’t qualify, apologize, correct or undercut herself.

The sixth step in becoming an inspirational leader is achieving a strong presence that moves others to believe in your views. Your body and voice must reinforce your leadership. Again Shakespeare is our guide. He said: “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.”

Begin by establishing your space. Women often make themselves too small. As the renowned voice teacher, Patsy Rodenburg, wrote in her essay, “Powerspeak: Women and their Voices in the Workplace,” published in the book, *Well-Tuned Women*, “Female habits revolve around reduction, denial, giving way and not taking up space.” We observe women folding themselves up, hands together, arms in, feet together. My advice: proudly and fully occupy your place at the podium or at the conference table. Every once in a while, put your hand on the chair next to you (men do it all the time).

Whether you stand or sit, be tall. Stature is an attitude. Women often stand or sit with their spine curved, and their shoulders rounded. Instead hold your head high, push your shoulders back, and set your legs slightly apart.

Learn, also, to be still. Stillness is a wonderful sign of leadership. Women often fidget—playing with a pen, with a lock of hair, adjusting a collar. Fidgeting tells others that you’re nervous or don’t take yourself seriously.

Center yourself. There are body movements that suggest we see ourselves as objects—brushing one’s face, cocking one’s head, smiling when the text doesn’t suggest we should, for example. And getting “girlish” when a man enters the conversation does nothing for you. Resist the temptation to play games. Focus your energy, and stop worrying about whether people like you.

Make your gestures strong. I’ve seen many senior women use repetitive, busy gestures from the wrist. Small, inconsequential gestures encourage the audience to dismiss what you’re saying. Gesture with the full arm, even at a table. And hold the gesture longer than you think you should.

Eye contact, too, is important. The best executives establish strong visual links with their audience. That puts them in a commanding position. Think of the animal world, which is divided into predators and prey. Predators have their eyes in the front of their heads. Prey have them on the side of their heads. Ours are out there in front. Use them. Make eye contact with people, and they will listen to you.

Use your voice to full advantage. It’s a powerful tool. The Humphrey Group teaches women how to free up voices that seem trapped or reduced. Let your voice begin in your chest, and breathe deeply.

Keep your tones strong. Avoid habits we see in women, such as keeping the voice high, or clipped. Don’t use a rising inflection at the ends of sentences, as though turning statements into questions. Remember the leadership role you’re playing, and train your voice to remember it too.

Finally, learn the power of the pause. Women often tell us they're afraid to pause, for fear someone with a bigger voice—a man's voice—will step in. The result is run-on sentences that are delivered in a breathy, out-of-control voice. Pauses give weight to your ideas. They tell the audience, "I've said something important. Think about it."

CONCLUSION

I'll conclude by coming back to my message: although we, as women, were raised to think we should not take the stage, we can and must do so if we want to be the leaders we know we can be.

Taking the stage requires that you give up the tendency to make yourself small. It demands that you step forward. To achieve this presence, you must be determined to lead. The steps I've discussed with you today are within everyone's grasp.

We in The Humphrey Group have seen women make remarkable strides in achieving these goals. My team and I have been privileged to work with some of the most successful women in Canadian business. And year after year we see them moving forward in their careers, receiving hard-won promotions, and achieving a level of prominence that puts them in the spotlight. Some of these women are in this room today. They can tell you, as we who coach them can, that taking the stage requires courage, determination, and boldness.

So, be bold. Corporations and businesses of all kinds are asking us to step up to leadership opportunities. The stage is set. Listen to your own convictions. Come forward. Take the stage.



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