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# Why Public Speaking Skills Are Critical—And How To Avoid 5 Big Mistakes Women Make

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The 5 Mistakes Women Often Make ICLIPART

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Despite how well you may do your job, it may not matter unless others know what you've accomplished. At some point, for others to understand the value you create, you need to be able to articulate what you're doing and why you're doing it.

In today's workplace, public speaking skills are expected, not just nice-to-have skills. When you're asked to give a formal presentation or called on in a meeting, if you can't express yourself persuasively, executives see that skills gap as a major reason to withhold a promotion. They note "Needs more polish" on performance evaluations.

By contrast, the ability to speak well is the essence of leadership: the ability to get work done through other people.

## Do Both Men And Women Equally Get Nervous When Asked To Speak Publicly?

My response as a presentation coach of more than three decades: Both men and women are equally affected by public speaking. However, some men seem to hide their nervousness more easily than women. In fact, women sometimes open their remarks to a group with a comment about their nervousness. For example, "I don't know why they ask me to cover this. I always get so nervous. I'd prefer to be at the back of the room sitting on my hands. But here goes..."

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When men have a case of the nerves, they tend to hide it by putting a shaking hand in their pocket or clasping both hands behind their back as if standing at military parade rest. If their knees start to wobble, a wide pants length covers the give-away. If their voice cracks, they try to recover with a fake cough. Because a man typically shows less emotion in his facial expression, the audience does not readily read the fear he may feel.

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Women, on the other hand, tend to just “deal with it.” That is, if their hand shakes as they gesture, they have no natural way to hide it. Dresses or slim-leg pants reveal wobbly knees. If their voice quivers, their natural facial expression readily reveals embarrassment. So a woman’s fear is typically more apparent.

For those men and women who do seem less fearful of public speaking, their confidence seems to flow from their success at other past activities as solo performers before a crowd—in sports, in music, or in art.

Let me emphasize at the outset that neither men or women are superior speakers. Both men and women have their challenges and advantages. But for now, I'm addressing those mistakes common to women.

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**Mistake #1: Jerking, jabbing gestures from the wrists or elbows.** The speaker with such gestures comes across as naturally animated—but untrained and unpolished. Rather than emphasize key points, the uncontrolled, random gestures become meaningless distractions. Instead, aim for smooth, purposeful gestures from the shoulder.

**Mistake #2: Speaking too softly.** Maybe that's because our moms taught us not to be a "big-mouth" or that being ladylike means to be soft-spoken. Whatever the cause, a soft volume in the business world is often equated with timidity. Not a good look, er, uh, sound!

**Mistake #3: Standing rigidly.** A stiff posture conveys an inflexible attitude—not to mention giving the impression of a deer-in-the-headlights "emptiness" to the presentation. The audience frequently mirrors the speaker's body language. When a speaker looks tense, the audience will feel tense.

**Mistake #4: Speaking too fast.** A fast speaking rate has its benefits: Audiences say that speakers who talk fast are energetic, enthusiastic, passionate, and knowledgeable. But when the speaking rate goes from fast to "too fast," audiences comment that the speaker seems "nervous," "immature," "tiresome," and "hard to understand."

**Mistake #5: Ending sentences with a rising intonation.** That is, a statement sounds like a question because the speaker raises, rather

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If such “up-speak” becomes a pattern, audiences will consider you tentative and in need of approval on your conclusions.

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Make these mistakes disappear and master their opposites to get positive attention—the kind that leads to advancement. Determine to speak up to move up.

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