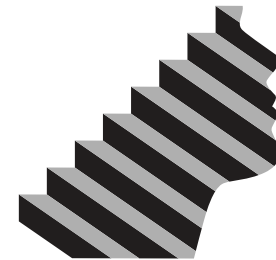


WOMEN, LANGUAGE & POWER

Giving Voice to Our Ambition



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PART 1

Losing Our Language

Overcoming the Cultural Constraints
That Undermine Women's Career
Advancement

A Note on Part One

If you are a woman reading this book, I know you. We may have never met, but I promise I know the difficulties you experience as a woman trying to progress in today's professional world—a world that remains predominantly run by men, with biases toward male leadership and barriers to women's advancement. I know how hard you work and how much you have to tolerate to work within this environment.

I know this because I have worked with so many women like you, who are trying to make it into management and leadership roles and confronting barriers and frustrated ambitions along the way. As a clinical psychologist who works as a communications and leadership coach to individual clients and teaches workshops to large groups of women, I have listened to scores of women share their professional aspirations, fears, hard pursuit of advancement, and disappointment when it doesn't come for reasons they either don't agree with or don't understand.

The conversation about the forces that challenge women's ability to rise to leadership levels, earn salaries commensurate with those of their male counterparts, and break the glass ceiling tends to focus on institutional barriers. This conversation is critical, as the more light we can shine on the structural forces that

unfairly hold women back, the closer we can come to eliminating them once and for all. However, my lens as a communication coach has allowed me to see another force hindering women's advancement—one that women have the capacity to influence and change today: how they use language.

Over the course of my career, I have observed women at all levels of management and leadership communicating in corporate environments. I have seen strong communication skills accelerate careers—and weak communication skills stall them. The ability to leverage communication to influence, inspire, and build alliances requires a high level of skill and confidence in the public arena. Women who have mastered these skills gain power and thus feel powerful. Women who have not yet mastered these skills are often missing the biggest piece of the puzzle.

Women have been conditioned to communicate in a style that can undermine their power and effectiveness at work, ultimately thwarting their advancement. Through no fault of their own, they have been socialized to speak and behave in ways that are antithetical to what is necessary to advance in most corporations. Women develop their technical skills and talents to the point of qualifying for advancement, but then many hit a point where they are told they don't have “what it takes” to be effective at senior levels and that, in essence, they are not leadership material.

Feeling helplessly sidelined by the power players and structures of their organizations, women often decide that “what it takes” to get to where they want to go just might not be worth it. Many begin to settle for less, pull back on their desire for promotions, or take less senior roles and focus on other priorities.

Essentially, they abandon the goals, ambitions, and dreams that once fueled their optimism and drive.

What these women often don't yet see is that language is a significant barrier to women's advancement. It is not a barrier that many people talk about, but it *is* a barrier we, as individuals, can do something about. Language is an accessible way women can reconnect with their power and consciously create alignment between what they want to achieve and what they say.

To help more women develop a new relationship with language and their power, I designed a workshop titled *Women, Language, and Power*. The workshop has afforded me the privilege of presenting to large and diverse audiences in order to spread awareness of how women's conditioning is working against their career advancement. This book is modeled on my current *Women, Language, and Power* workshop.

In Part One of this book, I share what I have learned from researching gender bias and its effect on women's sense of power and language in professional settings. In Part Two, I provide strategies and tools I use with my clients and share with the women who attend my workshop. These resources are designed to help women focus on what they *can* control—their language and communication style—when seeking to overcome their cultural conditioning and carefully navigate gender bias in the workplace.

My goal for this book is twofold. First, I hope to convince you that language is an invaluable tool for advancement and self-actualization. As women become more skilled in using language strategically and effectively, they find they get more of what they want. Moreover, when they take the time to articulate

without hesitation their own ideas, perspectives, and opinions, they themselves become more invested in and more committed to them. That commitment helps them feel empowered, confident, and even more capable of speaking to be heard.

Second, I hope to spark an important conversation among women and men. The ideas and issues I lay out in this book will lose their subversive power over women as more and more of us are aware of them.

While we need both women and men proactively working to reverse systemic gender bias and advocating for women's full equality, I have repeatedly seen women make incredible change in their own lives. Overcoming how culture constrains us is absolutely doable. It begins with discovering the ways our conditioning has fundamentally shaped—and minimized—who we are. It occurs when women rediscover and restore the categories of language and communication that our conditioning has robbed from us. It's evident when women learn to nimbly balance both stereotypically “masculine” and “feminine” styles in order to get what they want. And it has manifested when women stand fully in their power—and feel at home.

I hope this book will help you achieve just that.

A Note on Research

This book is rooted in research and my own insights gained through decades of working with women in my coaching practice. On both of these fronts, I offer two important notes.

First: The research most useful to me while developing my *Women, Language, and Power* workshop and writing this book largely relies upon white, middle-class women and men as

subjects. The exclusion of people from non-white races and ethnic backgrounds, from the full spectrum of socioeconomic circumstances, from the LGBTQ community, or whose gender identification is fluid and/or nonbinary leads to results that are not truly representative.

That said, a large percentage of my female clients are women of color. The essence of their experiences, as shared with me, is captured in the studies I've referenced in this book. My experience tells me that if you were raised as a female, this book will speak to you and offer relevant and substantive solutions.

Second: In order to illustrate the insights from research and real-world experience, I share anecdotes from my clients' professional lives. To protect their privacy, I have changed names and identifying details.

A Note to Men

When I present my *Women, Language, and Power* workshop for a company, I make a point of clarifying that men are also welcome. Typically, two or three men will join the female attendees. At the end of the workshop, the men's comments are, interestingly, almost always the same. First, they say something like, "I had no idea women were in such a bind. It's so unfair they feel confined in how they speak while simultaneously knowing that both confined and expanded language pose risks to their careers." Then they say, "I can now see how I can be helpful to the women I work with." Just as the women who attended the workshop leave feeling empowered, the men's responses let me know that they do as well.

To bring about individual and collective change in how

women are treated in the workplace, they need allies. To the men reading this book, I hope to raise your awareness of the barriers women confront as they attempt to advance in their careers. This book will provide insight as to how you can support women in speaking assertively, assure them they are safe in doing so, and play your role in helping women achieve full equality in the workplace. As more women own their power and the expression of it, we are *all* more empowered as a result.



CHAPTER 1

The Cultural Dismantling of Women's Power and Voice

A few years ago, I walked into the office of a client—we'll call her Nora—for the first time. Her organization had decided to pilot a program in which “high potential” leaders were matched with an executive coach. We engaged in the usual conversation I like to have in all first meetings with new clients. She told me about her career history and how she had arrived in her new role—a story that stretched back to her upbringing in a tiny New Zealand town and included fascinating twists and turns that landed her in Northern California.

Nora had recently been tapped by a major university system to lead a newly established health policy institute. She told me she wasn't confident in her ability to make it a success. I asked her what she believed she had done to be successful up to that point in her career, thinking she could replicate it in her new position. Even though I didn't yet know much about Nora, her success seemed a foregone conclusion to me. She wouldn't have earned her multiple degrees or been entrusted with a leadership role at a high-profile institute without a track record of success. Yet this simple question stumped her. It had not occurred to Nora that she had been successful. Let me put a finer point on it: It had not occurred to Nora that she'd played the *central role* in her success, such that she could depend on herself to do it again.

I wish I could tell you that her response surprised me. But I have seen this type of self-doubt from scores of women who've come through my practice over the decades. In so many cases, it hasn't occurred to women that they—not something outside of themselves—are at the center of their success.

Sitting together in a moment of silence, Nora began to tear up. She attributed her success, she explained, to the teams on which she'd worked. She also attributed her success to chance, timing, and various other factors that were independent of her. It was not until this emotional moment that she realized she had been denying herself credit for her success.

When I ask men what has made them successful, their answers come readily and are spoken in terms of what they themselves have done to earn success. Whereas women often struggle to attribute their success to themselves, men do so easily and are not quick to consider the other people and circumstances that might have played a hand in theirs.

To a degree, other people and circumstances always *do* play a hand in our success. But it is also true that to get hired or promoted in the first place, we have to show talent, work ethic, competence, and a comfort with self-promotion, asserting our authority, being decisive, and influencing others. In the absence of these skills and attributes, no person or circumstance can achieve success for us.

To men, this is black and white, blatantly obvious. To women? It's not that simple.

When I asked Nora what her goals were in our work together, I noticed some recognizable themes. She shared that she felt like an impostor in her role as head of the institute. Being

assertive made her feel controlling, and she had no interest in being a command-and-control leader. She recoiled at the notion that her ideas were superior to those of others, and she bristled at the thought of declaring them the institute's priority. But she recognized that doing so was a requirement of her new role. So she expressed a need for tools that would help her overcome her sense of being an impostor and allow her to feel confident when engaging with her peers and showing authority when leading her team. In a moment of clarity, she stated her conflict: "I just don't want to be a tall poppy." She explained that in New Zealand, "tall poppy syndrome" refers to a social practice of ridiculing or mocking people who think too highly of themselves and make themselves too visible. It was always safer, she said, to remain small.

As Nora spoke, I felt a familiar mix of compassion and astonishment. Compassion because I understand the cultural pressure for women to remain small and unimposing. Astonishment because I have worked with so many accomplished and impressive women who struggled with self-doubt despite having résumés that scream high achievement. Many of my clients, even those already at the executive level, struggle to fully see themselves as the leaders they are and embrace the power that comes with it.

Nora was no different. After earning her M.D., she completed a three-year fellowship at a high-profile public health policy program. She then took a role at a prestigious university and also joined their faculty. When I met her, she was just starting her tenure as head of the new institute. Her stellar list of achievements was still no match for her seriously stubborn impostor

syndrome. So, over the next three months, we did a little digging to understand the negative self-perception standing in her way in order to replace it with a new and liberated one.

Everyone I coach has insecurity. Whether it's feeling a need to prove oneself, feeling like an impostor, being a people pleaser, struggling with a stifling case of perfectionism, or something else entirely, all people experience at least some self-doubt. Yet women have a second and deeper layer of self-doubt that comes from how our culture trains and shapes us. That conditioning, which teaches us how to achieve society's expectations of femininity, ultimately severs us from our wholeness and our power. It cripples our sense of agency, or the degree to which we believe we can make decisions and speak on behalf of the life we want and the people we want to be.

Over our entire lives, women are given the message to “rein it in.” In preschool, it might be a parent insisting that it's “impolite” or “not nice” to play with a toy when someone else wants it. In grade school, it might be a teacher instructing us to sit down and wait our turn to speak. In high school, it might be peers shaming us for being “bossy” or wanting “too much” attention. In the workplace, it might be a manager demanding that we tone down our “aggressive” style as a condition of our promotion. At the leadership level, it might be a superior telling us we are “too ambitious” and outspoken about it.

From day one, women's behaviors and words are managed, policed, shamed, and corrected. This is done by moms, dads, siblings, friends, teachers, caregivers, media, and so on. The result of this conditioning tends to take a predictable form. It leaves women nervous to express their full ambitions—if we've

been able to hold onto them at all through years and decades in the workforce. We end up making ourselves smaller, retreating from our power and shrinking our bodies so that we communicate in a way that is as unimposing as possible. We become apprehensive in making decisions, particularly when it might upset others. We feel hesitant to speak up, take credit, openly compete for power, and ask for what we deserve, lest we offend a delicate social and patriarchal status quo. Our conditioning also leaves us without the language to speak on behalf of our wants, needs, and ambitions.

Since the feminist revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, women have made awe-inspiring strides earning representation and careers in every industry out there. But we have not yet found equal representation in leadership roles and positions of power.

My experience coaching women reveals that impediments to advancement are not because women lack competence, ability, or potential. Nor is it due to a lack of desire. There is a much larger force at play.

The Weight of Femininity

Throughout World War II, millions of once nonworking American women were promoted en masse into the labor force. When nearly 16 million American men were deployed to serve in the war, they left between 10 and 20 percent of all job roles vacant. This dramatic reduction in the workforce would have been economically devastating had women not stepped up.

As men shipped off to battle, the U.S. government launched a massive campaign to entice women to replace them in factories, on assembly lines, and in other jobs once considered possible

only for men. Inspired by Rosie the Riveter—with her comfortable and confident coveralls, unfussy bandanna, and “We can do it!” declaration—women rallied to assume men’s jobs to keep the economy alive. The military recruited women with the slogan “Free a Man to Fight,” which put 350,000 women in uniform to support military efforts in various capacities. They worked as noncombat pilots, truck drivers, translators, radio operators, and engineers.

As a result, an entire nation learned that women have brains and skills that made them capable of more than “women’s work.” Although some women had been seamstresses, teachers, or nurses, most typically performed domestic duties—cooking, cleaning, birthing, and mothering. Women’s natures, it was believed, made them best suited for the role of caretaker, whereas men’s natures made them best suited for the role of breadwinner.

World War II let the genie out of that bottle. When the American economy hummed along just fine—thrived, actually—with millions of women now in the workforce, it was hard to argue that *by their nature* women were less capable than men. Particularly when women were building the very machines that men were using in combat, ferrying planes and transporting cargo to army bases, and conducting simulated bombing missions in which they practiced low-flying fighter jet attacks to perfect them for combat. And let’s not forget how many of these women also had children at home.

This is a very challenging genie to stuff back into the proverbial bottle. Have no doubt—men, even some women, have tried mightily since.

As men came home from the war in 1945, they wanted their

jobs back. So they took them back. Some women returned contentedly to their domestic lives, but countless others bemoaned the demotion back to “women’s work.” Despite what many believed was a genetic impossibility, women—just like men—had ambition. Most women, it would turn out, were unwilling to abide that lie for much longer.

Many historians look back at the America of the 1950s and see a nation with a shiny veneer and rumbling restlessness beneath the surface. Behind the white picket fences and pristine lawns of America’s newly sprawling suburbs, women were growing ever resentful of their relegation to the home.

In 1957, *McCall’s* magazine hired Betty Friedan to write an article on “togetherness,” the domestic ideal of the happy housewife and the man who dutifully supports her and their children. For the assignment, she interviewed former classmates from Smith College fifteen years after their graduation.

As it turned out, an article on “togetherness” was not the article Friedan wrote. It was not the article she *could* write. Because what she discovered from those she interviewed was widespread malaise, disaffection, and disappointment with their lives. These women wanted careers that were available only to men. They wanted to use their brains and offer the value they knew they had in spheres beyond the domestic. Still peddling a certain image of women, *McCall’s* rejected Friedan’s article. But she persisted. She, too, had left behind a college degree and a onetime career to resign herself to the work of housewife and mother. She, too, wanted something else—that thing society still denied to women. Instead of abandoning the article, she expanded upon it and turned it into *The Feminine Mystique*, which

was published in 1963. It was, of course, a best seller multiple times over—and a book that is considered the catalyst of the second-wave feminism that was kindling in the 1950s, caught fire in the 1960s, and continued to raise holy hell through the 1970s.

Friedan defined the feminine mystique as the cultural assumption that women would necessarily find satisfaction in marriage, sexual passivity, motherhood, and domestic work. She observed that innumerable women were unfulfilled in their small, pigeonholed lives. Yet most struggled to put their finger on what defined their unhappiness, prompting Friedan to call it “the problem that has no name.”¹

The problem was that society viewed women as a function of their supposedly uniformly docile natures. This relegated them to narrow lives that denied them the potential for the growth and self-actualization that psychologist Abraham Maslow argued was fundamental to a meaningful life. In one fell swoop, Friedan articulated what so many women felt but had struggled to say: that they, too, were capable of creating and being of value in the unlimited ways afforded to men. That they, too, possessed the thoughts, ideas, words, talents, and skills that had been considered possible only for men.

Thanks to Friedan's book, the mistaken notion that women's natures limited their possibilities took an irreparable blow. It also unleashed scores of Friedan acolytes to study sex and gender norms in order to further liberate women from their psychological chains.

One such person was Anna Fels, M.D. In her New York City psychiatric practice some decades later, Dr. Fels noticed a pattern with several of her female patients: Despite their pro-

fessional dreams and successes, many women hit a point where they began to defer their ambition to that of others. Her male patients, on the other hand, showed no such pattern at any stage in their careers. Dr. Fels wanted to know why, and she set out to understand ambition and how it drives both men and women throughout their lives.

In the 2005 culmination of her research, *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives*, Dr. Fels wrote that little girls and little boys share equally large ambitions—wanting to be an Olympic athlete, the president of the United States, a diplomat, a judge, a famous actor, a best-selling author. Dr. Fels determined that ambition consists of two specific components: 1) mastery of a specific skill set and 2) public recognition from peers in the field of that skill set and the resulting accomplishments.²

With this definition of ambition in mind, Dr. Fels explained that women today appear to advance through education and into early careers like men do. The work of being a strong student, applying to postsecondary school programs, and working in entry-level, middle, and even senior management jobs poses little threat to women's ambition. In other words, women do as well as men when it comes to setting out to master a specific skill set.³

The problem comes, Dr. Fels observed, with the second element of ambition: recognition. Pursuing recognition represented a specific and powerful “taboo” for women that could not be avoided if they wanted to progress toward actualizing their ambitions.⁴ Eventually, if women want positions of increasing power and scope, they must raise their visibility within an organization. Doing so requires that they proactively advo-

cate for recognition of their strengths and accomplishments. It is at this point in their careers that women are presented with an existential, and typically subconscious, choice: seek and receive recognition in order to continue to act on their ambitions, or abandon their ambitions in order to preserve a “feminine” identity. This is because, Dr. Fels determined, seeking recognition and maintaining a “feminine” identity are mutually exclusive. Dr. Fels concluded that the social pressure to remain “feminine” far exceeded the social permission for women to pursue recognition. Whether intuitively or from experience, her female patients grasped that if they promoted themselves at work and attempted to elevate their visibility, their “feminine” identity and reputation would be threatened.

The prohibition against openly seeking recognition is deeply ingrained. Dr. Fels quoted one sociologist who interviewed 45 senior women in management and, with amazement, noticed:

None of them talked of the need for visibility...No one seemed to recognize that if one is not “seen” by others as the kind of person who should have a particular job, that all the competence in the world would not get it for them. And then when the system didn’t spontaneously reward these women for their work purely on its merits, they were “helplessly disappointed.”⁵

While many women prioritize preservation of feminine norms over their very real ambitions in order to avoid backlash, this is not an option without risks. If we stay silent on our achievements and strengths, we begin to hear feedback from the higher-ups like “You don’t have any visibility with other senior

leaders.” Or “You don’t speak up and articulate your position decisively and with authority.” We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t. No wonder so many women see it as preferable or safer simply to give up and remain in less ambitious roles or even opt out entirely.

I see this conflict repeatedly in my practice, where female clients will begin to back down from their ambitions once they have to wade into the messy territory of seeking recognition. They will say things like “I don’t *have* to get the promotion in this round; clearly, it means more to him.” Or “I don’t want them to think I only care about the title.” Or “My team did the work. I don’t want it to sound like it was just me.” When I hear such statements, I am reminded of Dr. Fels’s poignant summation: “Women refuse to claim a central, purposeful place in their own stories, eagerly shifting the credit elsewhere and shunning recognition.”

I have coached many women who have gone to great lengths to avoid taking credit for their accomplishments or accepting recognition when it is wholly deserved. As a result, we keep ourselves separate from the full manifestation of our ambitions. If this is not a function of our gender—as it was once believed—but a reluctance to be perceived as deviating from a narrow definition of femininity, it begs the questions: How does recognition specifically threaten our sense of femininity? What is our cultural definition of femininity? When and how do we learn to conform to it? And why does it feel like an identity crisis when we attempt to behave like the central agents of our lives?

Why does it feel like an identity crisis when we attempt to behave like the central agents of our lives?

The Three Constraints on Women

Seeking answers to these questions sent me on an eye-opening journey, where I learned from an all-star lineup of brilliant feminist thinkers, gender studies experts, and language researchers. I read everything from midcentury advocates of women's liberation to modern-day inspections of the glass ceiling that remains unbreakable to so many. Each book, article, and research paper I read affirmed the experiences of the women who passed through my workshops and practice.

Drawing from the work with my clients and my own reading and research, a portrait of women's cultural conditioning began to emerge. Specifically, three predominant patterns of conditioning rose to the surface, which I call "the three constraints on women." They are the mechanisms that serve to steadily dismantle women's sense of self and mold us into something called "feminine." To get us there, they constrain our wholeness, our agency, our self-perception, our self-confidence, our ambition, our feelings, our healthy sense of entitlement, and—

ultimately—our language. It is not that our DNA or biology limits us. Rather, the constraints are socialization processes—so subtle we may miss them—that put women in the supporting, not central, role in our own stories.

We are left with only those pieces of ourselves that align to culturally sanctioned ideals of femininity.

All told, these constraints dictate the boundaries of femininity and the expectations for women's behavior from our earliest days. The three constraints—each the focus of one of the three ensuing chapters—are as follows:

Considerate: *Women are conditioned to consider others first.*

Contained: *Women are conditioned to contain their bodies and voices.*

Collaborative: *Women are conditioned to prioritize collaboration over hierarchy.*

The three constraints converge to function as a sieve; like soil through a strainer, certain parts of us are left behind. Our sense of power and central agency are separated from our sense of self. We are left with only those pieces of ourselves that align to culturally sanctioned ideals of femininity.

Constrained Language

Our words convey our thoughts and communicate who we are. If our sense of self is filtered through and winnowed down by the three constraints, our language and communication style are, as well. The constraints ultimately strip women's language repertoire of its authority and authenticity—a fact that I have witnessed time and again in my coaching practice. My work exposed me to the chasm between men's and women's language: Men use language to assert power, and women use language to convey a lack of it. My observations were validated and clarified when I was introduced to Robin Tolmach Lakoff, who published the groundbreaking essay "Language and a Woman's Place" in 1973.

As a professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, Lakoff studied the differences in male and female language patterns, their roots, and their societal effects. Her research showed that language is elemental to gender inequality, in that it is both a byproduct and a reinforcer of it. She believed

that society teaches women to be hesitant and lack confidence. As a result, women's language is hedged, softened, apologetic, and infused with doubt. She saw the opposite with men, who were taught by society to be domineering and in control. This allows men to use language that is infused with force, certitude, assertiveness, and sometimes aggressiveness. These qualities are emphasized through body language and a wide range of tone and volume.⁶

In Lakoff's assessment, language influences how men and women feel about themselves. She believed that language fortifies gender stereotypes and perceptions of how men and

Whereas men's language reinforces their power, women's language reinforces their lack of it.

women should behave in society and relate to others. This keeps us stuck in a vicious cycle, where language limits the opportunities perceived as possible for women and the perceived possibilities for women keep language limited.

Lakoff's work was a paradigm shift, revealing to me the inextricable link between language and power. Her insights solidified my understanding of the stark differences I saw in the way men and women communicate in business and use language to navigate their careers. Throughout my coaching career, I have seen that men are far more comfortable and confident using language to promote their work and ideas. They are better able to advocate for themselves, ask for promotions, and engage in confrontational conversations. I have also seen how women's discomfort with these kinds of conversations hold back their careers and preclude them from achieving promotions, influence, and positions of power. Women's disempowered language is the

end result of a disconnection to their sense of self and power. Whereas men's language reinforces their power, women's language reinforces their lack of it.

When I began coaching, I witnessed the suffocating weight of women's cultural conditioning. And when the three constraints crystallized for me, I finally understood why women struggle to find the language to ask for what they want, articulate their ambitions, or act on their power. As we spend more time under the thumb of our conditioning and grow more disconnected from our power, we lose more and more of our language.

Therein lies the hope and opportunity. We can liberate ourselves from the three constraints and all the ways they have held us back and kept us quiet.

The Exception Proves the Rule

When I first read Lakoff's work, I saw many of my female clients represented in it. But I did not fully see myself. Every rule has its exceptions, and looking back on my childhood, I can see that I am one. Due to the idiosyncratic dynamics of my family, I was trained in a communication style different from what Lakoff described as typical for most women.

I am the youngest of four children; I have two brothers and one sister. Our home was wildly dysfunctional, with parents always at odds, arguing regularly in disturbing ways and leaving us kids to manage on our own. I was painfully shy, but I learned quickly that there was neither space nor time for shyness in my house. If you wanted to be heard or get your wants and needs met, you had to speak up and speak fast. Anytime we were all together, it was a constant fight for the floor. Once you had

it, you had better make your point quickly and forcefully—if you didn't, someone else was right there to talk over you and take back the floor, and your moment was gone. It was a house where aggressively elbowing your way into position to hold the floor was not only a need but also a survival skill. At times, it was exhausting and painful. As the youngest and least-skilled speaker, I was easily talked over and dismissed.

My childhood was stressful, to be sure. The fighting in my house took its toll. But every challenge leaves its gifts if we look for them. Beneath the arguments were lessons in the art of dialogue and debate. I wasn't the only family member absorbing messages about how to speak aggressively, how to speak persuasively, and how to speak to hold someone's attention. I was just the youngest. I had the advantage of observing and learning from all of my family members who became better and better at what I will affectionately call our family "debates."

My mom, who studied acting in college, used extremely dramatic language. This gave her speaking a theatrical, performative quality. Even if what she was saying bordered on hyperbolic, her points were vivid and bold, designed to shock you into listening for what was to come. My dad was never far from a philosophy book, and I absorbed his curiosity and ability to substitute questions for statements. He taught me the powerful role that questions can play in making a point or opening up new thinking. One of my brothers would analyze an argument so incisively that he could break it down in a matter of seconds. He taught me the importance of having a logical, well-supported argument to protect yourself from attack—something I struggled with, as I preferred hand-to-hand combat over skilled intellectual debate.

My other brother was brilliant at economy of words and power of imagery. He loved using clever analogies and iconic examples to make his point. And my sister was the most measured of the four kids. She would wait for her moment and then, clearly and concisely, make a well-thought-out and formidable argument. She never lost track of her point in the emotional heat.

Despite being tense and often contentious, the communication in our house was built on the full range of language possibilities. Both the women and men in my family were encouraged, even conditioned, to speak assertively, aggressively, with drama, and without reservation. We learned to push our way to the front of the line, compete for attention, and fight it out point by point. At no point were we taught to be considerate of others, to be yielding, to defuse tension, or to soothe hurt feelings.

How my family taught me to communicate was the polar opposite of how my teachers and most peers wanted me to communicate. My family taught me that shyness gets you nowhere, so I'd long since learned to bulldoze over and disconnect from my shyness such that it—despite being my natural state—grew unfamiliar to me. Instead, my default had become an almost incessant chatter to conceal my shyness. At school, I'd talk so much that my teachers were always asking me to talk less and even made me sit for long periods of time in a coat closet. They were constantly telling me to raise my hand, let others speak, or wait my turn. In other words, they were constantly telling me to talk and behave "like a girl." Many tried to police and constrain my language and how I was using it. When they asked me to talk quietly, defer to others, and be still, it felt foreign. Because there

was nothing about my homelife that was reflected in what they were asking of me. I didn't get it, and it didn't take.

This was all for better and for worse. For better, I don't have to leap miles outside of my comfort zone to assert myself with intensity and conviction. For me, these muscles are well developed. For worse, I have hurt many people in my personal and professional life with unnecessary aggression or a dismissive tone—behavioral patterns I've worked hard to overcome. Professionally, it's posed its risks, as well. Years ago, a consultant to a company I worked for told me, "You could be very influential if you were not so intense and didn't sound so angry."

In contrast to my linguistic education at home, I had an additional, very specific experience with my mother at her workplace that also left an imprint on me. Interestingly, my mom took on a different persona outside of our home. When I was in grade school, she taught a special education class at a middle school. I didn't like school (particularly the coat closet with which I'd grown so familiar), so as often as I could get away with it, I would feign being sick. This meant I had to go to work with my mom, as no one else was home to watch me during the weekday.

My mom worked out of a portable classroom trailer that was parked on the back lot of the school. Her students were assigned to her class when they were unable to keep up with their regular academic coursework. She decorated this dismal trailer with rugs, stuffed chairs, and round tables for group work. It was warm, cozy, and inviting. As she tutored her students, I would sit in the corner of the trailer in a big chair and observe. My mom spoke to her students differently from how she spoke to us in our home. While she wouldn't turn off her flair for the

dramatic, she toned down the hyperbole and artfully balanced her blunt honesty with supportive language and a kinder tone.

Many of her students had been held back anywhere from one to three years. So they might have been in sixth grade but two years older than everyone in their class and still struggling to read at a fourth-grade level. These children faced numerous challenges, but my mom never doubted their potential to overcome them. She was not about to let them lose belief in themselves, either. She understood how to motivate students and was very direct in her attempts to do so. To a male student, she would say things like, "Do you want a girlfriend someday? Will you want to take her out on a date at a restaurant? If you can't read the menu, how will you ever get a girlfriend? The answer is—you won't. You don't want to be embarrassed." Then she would pivot to speaking supportively to emphasize her desire to help them. "You deserve a girlfriend," she would say. "And when you take her on a date, you're going to want to be able to read the menu. So let's do the work." Once students signaled their desire to try, my mom would sit next to them, ask them to sound out the words, and offer guidance when they got stuck.

And so began the lesson and their motivation to learn to read. When they succeeded, she'd reaffirm their efforts with kind words of encouragement. If they appeared as though they were going to give up, she'd come right back at them with a direct statement about how they simply had to figure this out and learn to read.

I would sit in awe and watch as she moved back and forth between direct and confrontational and softer, more compassionate

language and tones. While it would take some decades for me to grasp the magnitude of what my mom was doing, I could see that her approach was powerful. *She* was powerful, and her students respected her and worked to meet her high expectations. She was able to make them feel whole at the exact time she was insisting they address their deficits. She confronted them while keeping their sense of empowerment intact.

My experience has made two things undeniable to me. First, women can just as easily “talk like men.” Where I have been told to “tone it down,” most women must be coached to “turn it up”—a practice that at first feels very unnatural to many. Second, women have to “thread a needle” when choosing their language and how they communicate it when trying to advance in their careers. We can “turn it up” only so much before we push too far, disrupt the status quo, and face backlash. Just as my mom had been with her students, women can be incredibly effective when utilizing both direct and supportive language to advance their goals.

Raucous nature aside, my upbringing made me comfortable using language in more stereotypically masculine ways, including using my whole body, more of the physical space around me, and the full range of vocal tone and volume to animate points. The pushback I got from being “too assertive” or “too aggressive,” especially once I entered the working world, forced me to grow comfortable counterbalancing my communication habits with more stereotypically female ones. The net effect was that, relatively early in my career, I found myself using both stereotypically masculine and feminine ways of speaking. This left me with a far greater set of options when I chose my language and

how I expressed it. It’s not that I spoke like both a man and a woman. It’s that I spoke like a *person*—a whole person.

Liberation Through Language

My conditioning and experience required that I bring more stereotypically feminine language into my repertoire. As I learned to soften some of the blunt force of my language, I discovered that I was more effective in my communication. While I did not need to learn to be direct, I learned how to be supportive while still being assertive and clear. In doing so, I discovered a road map for how women can leverage and exercise their power without so dramatically and rapidly upsetting social norms that they face backlash and punishment for it.

While my path to this discovery was from the opposite direction of most women’s paths, I understood that any woman can change her language to change her relationship with her own power and her power dynamic with others. Any woman can rediscover the

full language repertoire that has been denied her and choose language that strategically advances her goals. Any woman can learn to thread the needle and find the mix of language and effective communication style that will manifest her dreams and full ambitions.

We often believe that our thoughts inform our language, and this is true. But I have seen it a thousand times—our language can just as easily change our thoughts. In changing our language to voice exactly what we want to say, in the way we want to

In changing our language to voice exactly what we want to say, in the way we want to say it, we begin to influence our thoughts about ourselves.

say it, we begin to influence our thoughts about ourselves. We begin to roll back the cultural conditioning that has suppressed our sense of self. As we practice connecting with those stereotypically masculine language choices we've been incorrectly led to believe were antithetical to our femininity, we rediscover our natural-born power and grow more comfortable showing it to ourselves and others. We view ourselves as larger and more multifaceted than we have before. We begin to experience our wholeness and learn how to live within it.

From our wholeness, women are unstoppable.

After I began my work with Nora, she made consistent and courageous efforts to change her language and how she used it, and she quickly changed herself. She spent more time speaking in an honest, direct, and unfiltered way. Within a few months, she had developed a stronger presence and greater confidence as a woman and a leader.

We first worked on her language to communicate and enforce clear boundaries and expectations at work. Because she believed she had to put everyone else first, she thought she had to accommodate all requests. This created a situation where she was so consumed by other people's low-priority requests that she had no time to focus on her ideas for the institute. For example, Nora observed that a lax and unclear work-from-home policy was disrupting productivity. Yet people had expressed the desire for this flexibility, so she had been hesitant to deny it. We worked on using language that was direct and unapologetic, such as "Our productivity has declined since we instituted a work-from-home option. As of September 15, I will be changing the policy for working at home. Until further notice, we will

all work in the office. If there are special circumstances that may require accommodation, I will handle each decision on a case-by-case basis."

From there, we had to liberate her small sense of self—that part of her that was terrified of being perceived as a tall poppy. In our conversations about what it means not just to have the title of a leader but also to *act* like a leader, it hit Nora: Leaders *are* tall poppies! In effect, her fear of being cut down to size shaped her leadership philosophy, and she and her team were paying dearly for it. When Nora reframed her perception of leaders as tall poppies, she finally grasped that her team *wanted* her to be a leader and *needed* her vision and guidance. Nora's vision was clear to her, so we worked on language to share it with others and, in no uncertain terms, communicate it as the vision of the institute. We chose strong language, like "I am sharing with you my vision and intentions for the institute" as opposed to "These are some thoughts for the institute." We chose language that projected confidence, such as "I know we can achieve the goals laid out in my vision" rather than "I hope we will get there with our hard work."

Lastly, we worked on language that would allow Nora to step into the mindset and power of a leader—to the benefit of herself, her team, and the organization. This required that she unapologetically delegate smaller priorities and tasks to free up her time to build the institute, socialize her vision, create alignment across the organization for her vision, and recruit partners. We drafted language like this: "Although I have greatly benefited from being a part of this task force, I will no longer be able to attend meetings as of October 1. My new role will

require a substantial amount of my time to establish the institute. I look forward to updates on your activities and offering support in a new capacity.”

Nora came to see that she was too valuable and her role too big for less crucial activities. She came to understand that, in her new role, she was too powerful to let herself remain bogged down by her cultural conditioning. Doing so would undermine not only her success but also the institute's.

We can view Nora's story in one of two ways. We can be baffled by how a woman so credentialed and accomplished could lack confidence and be plagued by impostor syndrome at this stage in her career. Or we can consider how the messages she absorbed from society served to keep her small and separate from her power. We can consider all of the cultural training she received—about not standing out, not speaking up for her ideas, and not thinking she was all that smart. We can consider all the ways people made her believe her role is to put others first and speak in a way that makes everyone feel comfortable and included. And, despite all this cultural conditioning, we can marvel at what she still managed to achieve.

I see it the second way. What we women achieve, in spite of all the cultural forces working against us, is nothing short of phenomenal. Yet seeing this view requires that we understand the potent effect of our cultural conditioning and the three constraints: Considerate, Contained, and Collaborative. Our cultural constraints are real, powerful, and oppressive. But they are a lie. You are not genetically destined to live according to the three constraints. In absorbing this lie, we accept the gendered assumptions that rob us of our central agency and full ambition.

In absorbing this lie, we have denied our wholeness.

This is not a reason to despair. Paradoxically, women have developed certain superpowers—namely, a categorical gift for demonstrating compassion, practicing inclusion, building consensus, and cultivating a collective vision. The world needs our superpowers. But it needs our wholeness more.

Our language holds the key.

Talking Our Way to the Top

In the ensuing chapters, I show you how each of the three constraints limits women's sense of self and potential for advancement. I give examples of how we as children absorb the constraints as a fact of our gender and how they inhibit our options when we carry them over into our adult lives. I demonstrate empirically that we *all* have the same wherewithal, capacity, and know-how to communicate assertively, clearly, powerfully, and shrewdly in order to advance our careers and achieve our dreams.

I also explain how this advancement has been denied to us. We are not denied advancement because of something inherent in our natures or because it's not “a woman's place.” It is because, for centuries, society has systematically trained us to believe that women are not wired to use language that is direct, forceful, authoritative, or animated. In moments when we must speak strongly, we have been led to believe that we must borrow a style of communication from somewhere outside of us and then quickly return it to its place before it becomes toxic.

My goal in writing this book is to offer you language and communication choices from a full repertoire so that you can

begin to create a different power dynamic—with yourself and with others. I will show you how to integrate language and communication styles that will advance *your* purpose, *your* ambitions, and *your* power. Your professional aspirations will thank you. They demand your advocacy and voice today—because time has a way of chipping away at those dreams if we don't intervene on their behalf and step into the power they require of us.

Just as the women of Friedan's era struggled to articulate their malaise and dissatisfaction with small, domestic lives, today we struggle to articulate our ambition and power. As was the case in the 1950s, the language doesn't yet feel comfortable or socially acceptable to us. Once the women of Friedan's era were able to pinpoint and articulate their desire for work beyond the domestic sphere in order to self-actualize and build a meaningful life, they had a defined problem and could then fashion a targeted solution.

Today, once we recognize the problem of how the three constraints erode our sense of wholeness and thereby restrict our power and our language, we can solve it. We can quite literally talk ourselves out of it and talk our way to the top.

