



# How Women Can Talk Themselves Out of Speech-Based Gender Biases

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In her book *Feminist Fight Club*, [recently excerpted on Fast Company](#), author Jessica Bennett writes about the “persistent double standard” that women face in the office every time they open their mouths: Use too many stereotypically “feminine” speech patterns, and you risk falling victim to gender bias and undercutting your authority. But carefully prune those habits out of the way you talk, and you not only sacrifice your own authenticity but risk being penalized by those same sexist biases as too “masculine.”

Bennett rightly points out that it’s a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” type of situation, which we’ve termed the “Goldilocks dilemma” (women are unfairly forced to get it “just right”). But she’s wrong to conclude that “there is no right way to talk—specially if you want to sound like, you know, yourself.” Here’s why.

## **“Authenticity” Doesn’t Mean Having Only One True Self**

The idea that being “authentic” is somehow [essential to remaining comfortable, happy, and successful in our careers](#) is a popular one, but authenticity is often misunderstood.

None of us has one true self, the kernel of our very being that defines who we are in all situations and for always. We grow and change with new experiences, challenges, failures, and successes, and there are multiple aspects to ourselves at any given moment. Many of these aspects seem to contradict one another, but none necessarily represents on its own our “true authentic self.”

When it comes to how we communicate, we all have an articulate, confident side that’s forceful, succinct, decisive, and doesn’t rely on filler words (“um,” “er,” “ah,” “basically,” and “I mean”) to make our points. We also have a less hard-edged side

that's primarily concerned with building and maintaining relationships. This side may seek to soften the impressions we make by using phrases like "I'm sorry," "you know," and "I mean"—and Bennett is right to see that those verbal tics aren't categorically bad. But to suggest that only *one* of these two styles reflects our authentic voice misunderstands human nature.

## Using Our Many Voices

And that's all before we throw gender into the mix.

Because workplaces are so suffused with gender bias, women need to have both a forceful, decisive style *and* an inclusive style—and probably many others—at the ready. Just as we dress differently for different occasions, we need to call on different communication styles to accomplish our career objectives. So when Bennett dismisses a career coach's advice on the grounds that she wants to "sound like" herself, she's missing the point: Whatever she says and however she says it, Bennett will *always* sound like herself.

Just because a woman finds a particular communication style more comfortable doesn't mean that style is more authentic, and it certainly doesn't mean it's a more useful tool in the workplace as a result. What's more, being able to toggle among multiple communication styles doesn't mean that women are pandering to sexist norms—it's simply a skill that every effective leader needs to master to accomplish the objective at hand.

After all, the problem isn't just how a professional woman talks but the fact that she talks from inside a woman's body, with all of the discriminatory stereotypes associated with being a woman. We believe that it certainly isn't fair, but the reality is that in some situations she may be most effective if she's articulate and direct, while in others she can use filler words and softer expressions as a way to connect with people. So even though Bennett is right that we need to focus on combatting

the gender stereotypes that hold women back, she's wrong to suggest that a woman's speaking habits don't matter.

## Overcoming the Goldilocks Dilemma

Women need to learn to speak in ways that avoid or overcome the discriminatory effects of the Goldilocks dilemma. These are just a few examples of how:

Women tend to say things like, "This may be a dumb idea but . . ." or "I'm not an accountant but . . ." in an effort to soften what they fear will be an "aggressive" impression. But this undercuts the sense of competence and conviction that she's projecting. She has to present her views articulately, forcefully, and

unambiguously. And while that doesn't mean forsaking a pleasant, inclusive, and engaging approach, it *does* require leaving no uncertainty as to her position.

Gender stereotypes allow men to bark orders, issue directives, and demand results in direct, even harsh ways. This tends to be an impossible communication style for women who want to be seen as effective leaders in **an inevitably gender-biased workplace**. A woman can and should be direct, but she can't be effective if she's perceived as unconcerned with the feelings of the people she's dealing with.

We communicate not just with the words we use but with our body language, too. Regardless of how articulate a woman is, if she speaks with her eyes down, her arms close to her body, her shoulders slumped, and her legs crossed, her message will be lost. People remember more about how she presents herself than the words she uses.

Women don't need to stop "talking like women," and they certainly don't need to start "talking like men"—both ideas reinforce a gender-based hierarchy that shortchanges women. But the surest way out of the Goldilocks dilemma is for women to remember that authenticity doesn't require the same speech pattern in

every situation. In reality, overcoming gender bias requires a variety of communication techniques, and we should never let the mistaken belief that we only have one authentic self-prevent us from using all of them.