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Managing Yourself

How to Overcome Your Fear of Speaking Up in Meetings

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Summary.   If you find it difficult to speak up during virtual meetings, you're not alone. You might feel your ideas are still half-baked and won't be seen as valuable. Or, perhaps, you joined the company remotely and feel reserved around your new teammates or senior colleagues.... **more**

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Do you find it difficult to speak up during virtual meetings? If so, you're not alone. Many factors contribute.

1) It's harder to read physical and social cues. In-person, it was easier to figure out when voicing your opinion was welcome and appropriate — someone might lean towards you or gesture at you to invite a response. But noticing these expressions onscreen is difficult, and even impossible on a very big team.

2) If you're a junior employee or someone who joined the company remotely and are still settling in, you may feel especially reserved around your new teammates or senior colleagues. Hierarchy can be intimidating. You don't want to come across as uninformed or foolish to bosses or clients, or you may feel that someone more seasoned than you will take your suggestions as personal critiques.

3) Lastly — and this happens in person, too — you might feel your ideas are still half-baked and won't be seen as valuable. This often occurs when you're asked to brainstorm on the spot and there is less time to make a well-formed contribution.

Whatever the reason, know that we all struggle to speak up at times, no matter what point we are at in our careers. That said, finding the courage to do so is critical to your success, as well as to the success of your team and your organization. The quality of your collective decisions are driven by the diversity of your experiences and expertise — and if you stay silent, your unique perspective will never be considered when making them.

To be more productive in your next virtual meetings, shift your mindset around what it means to speak up — for you and for everyone else. We propose three ways to do this:

Shift 1: From "My idea may be incomplete" to "It could be the source of someone else's breakthrough."

Research on self-censorship finds that people refrain from speaking up for various reasons. Employees remain silent because they:

- Fear being ostracized
- Don't want to be embarrassed

- Want to avoid negative remarks
- Feel like speaking up is inappropriate

For these reasons, people often decide to hold back an idea that is not "bulletproof" yet, something that may be happening even more in virtual meetings where people are highly aware of time limits. Microsoft Teams, for instance, informs participants that a meeting "will end in five minutes." These reminders are meant to help leaders allocate time to different items on the agenda, but they can also increase the threshold for speaking up and inhibit people from sharing incomplete ideas or rough drafts of their thinking.

Shift your mindset: Recognize that your half-baked idea could be the first step in a team breakthrough. Think of it as a suggestion that the rest of the team can build on. For example, if you propose to gather more user feedback on a prototype, it could lead to a pivot in terms of what the final product looks like.

Sometimes taking an unknown path on a hike leads to a mesmerizing panorama that could have been easily missed. Remind yourself that great ideas are generated the same way. Incomplete ideas related to the meeting's purpose are not a waste of time. In fact, they may end up helping your team advance from idea to execution.

Shift 2: From "It's probably not my place to speak up" to "Silence is not in the best interest of the team."

Young people are often reluctant to share ideas because they feel like they are not in a position to do so. You might think: "I don't have enough experience to make this point," or, "I'm so new to this," but you should never underestimate the value that your perspective brings to the table.

Consider this example from one of our clients, Lilli. During a brainstorming session on how to improve the quality of meetings, everyone got a chance to share their ideas. Lilli, a junior colleague at the organization, was initially hesitant because she wasn't sure if she could influence the decision. But thinking about how her idea could impact everyone on the team, she decided to speak up. She shared

that she recently read an article about how Amazon starts executive meetings by reading a six-page memo in silence for 30 minutes to get all meeting participants on the same page.

This meeting style was completely new to her team members, and they responded with amazement, hesitation, and worries. The "memo meeting style" became a focal point of the brainstorm. In the end, the group decided that this new method wouldn't work for every meeting, but surely could be a promising approach for some. Now, "memo-based meetings" are a common practice at Lilli's firm, and have been evaluated as highly effective.

Lilli's decision compass was very straightforward: Maybe everyone in the room knew about the meeting style she was presenting. Maybe not. And if the latter was true, then at least she was providing an alternative approach that enriched the group's decision making, because people would be better informed. If Lilli remained silent, her teammates would have missed out on a vital piece of information that ultimately strengthened their choice.

Shift your mindset: Reed Hastings, co-founder and CEO of Netflix puts it like this: "We now say that it is disloyal to Netflix when you disagree with an idea and do not express disagreement. By withholding your opinion, you are implicitly choosing not to help the company."

For your next meeting, go in with this mindset. If you believe you may have an opinion or piece of information that could be material to the success of the project or the organization, say it. If you are someone lower in the hierarchy, follow these three rules of thumb:

1. Make sure your idea is relevant to the group, not just one individual. In the case of the latter, book a one-on-one with that person and talk about your idea then.
2. If you plan to disagree, offer an alternative solution or constructive criticism. Don't disagree with an intent to insult, but with an intent to support.
3. Aim to strengthen the discussion. What you say should be relevant to the goal of the meeting in a broad sense. Meandering about the latest disruption in Silicon Valley might be an interesting topic but

is probably not on-topic during an in-depth dialogue on how to improve the logistics department of a retailer you work for.

Shift 3: From "I want to sound intelligent" to "This is really about the collective intelligence of my team so we can all succeed."

"Teams with 60% stars outperform those with 80% or more stars. That's the evidence from Wall Street analysts, World Cup soccer qualifying matches, and NBA basketball," says Wharton Professor Adam Grant. Contrary to popular belief, most Nobel prize winners are not isolated loners who came up with brilliant ideas all by themselves.

Research on collective intelligence demonstrates that decision-quality is driven by the joint intelligence of the group — not by the most intelligent group member. When you speak up, whether it's based on expertise or experience or just a wild idea, your participation increases collective intelligence and hence the decision-making quality of your team.

Shift your mindset: Think of your next virtual meeting as a puzzle that everyone is there to solve. Each team member holds unique pieces to that puzzle, based on their different expertise and experiences. With this framing in mind, will you still hold back your ideas? When you speak up in a meeting you are not trying to stand out but rather to share and help process as much on-topic information as you can. Your piece of the puzzle might be really small, but it might just help complete the team's puzzle.

Now, here's how to actually speak up.

A mindset shift is only one part of the problem. It must be followed by speaking up and being heard. Maybe you want to speak up but, in the moment, you forget what you want to say. Or you're an introvert who'd rather write an email with your ideas. Or maybe there are just too many senior folks in the meeting, and you don't know when it's appropriate to jump in.

Let's take a look at a few ways you can make yourself heard.

Prepare your nudge: Think of one on-topic question that you want to see answered during the meeting and write it on a post-it. Then, stick it on your computer screen. The post-it is a kind nudge, inviting you to speak up. Also, in case you get "cold-called" you have at least one thoughtful question to advance the discussion.

Rehearse your introduction: How you introduce yourself at the beginning of a meeting lets people know how you can contribute and how involved you'd like to be.

Don't say: "Hi, I'm Haruto, and I'm happy to be here."

Do say: "Hi, I'm Haruto. Thank you for inviting me to this meeting. I look forward to sharing my initial thoughts and ideas for this project based on a design-thinking course I recently took."

Use the chat functions: If you're not comfortable speaking, use the chat window to your advantage. Plenty of people use the chat function on WebEx or Zoom to first make themselves "seen" and then "heard." When someone notices your helpful question, they'll be sure to ask you to elaborate and build on your idea.

Find your window: Don't hesitate to react fast when someone deliberately pauses. Research on turn-taking behavior shows that the person who is currently speaking is likely to resume speaking after a 0.5 second pause because the speaker feels that others had plenty of time to respond. When you see that window, unmute yourself and share your idea. You could say, "I'm going to quickly jump in to talk about...."

Raise your hand: If you can't find a window to make your point, try using emojis (applaud or give praise) along with the raised hand emoji to draw attention. That will show the speaker that you're engaged, you heard them, and you would like to contribute.

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Show that you're engaged: This is easier in virtual meetings with fewer people, when you don't need to scroll to see all of the participants. Avoid turning into a statue during the call. Use non-verbal communication to respond to what people are saying and signal that you're present. Give a thumbs up when someone shares an interesting thought or use your facial expression to demonstrate surprise when someone says something that makes you curious. Non-verbal behaviors make speaking up feel more natural.

Show appreciation when someone invites you to contribute. Appreciation builds stronger relationships. Say: "Thanks Julia for inviting me to share my two cents. I think we can really advance this challenge if everyone gives input based on our own experience and expertise." In this case, Julia receives praise for inviting others to speak up, and you help to establish a norm where sharing ideas and perspectives is welcomed and expected.

Simply put, speaking up is good for you and your team. So in your next meeting, use these tips and give it a shot. Who knows, your two cents could change the face of a new product!

TB

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