

# HOW TO SPEAK WELL IN PUBLIC

*Whether speaking at a conference, lecturing for the first time or presenting at company-wide meeting, speaking in public can be a nerve-wracking experience even for the most confident communicators. Halima Hodzic reports*

FEATURE HALIMA HODZIC. PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAPHICSTOCK

**E**ffective public speaking is no easy feat, especially for women. You may only have a short time to create the right impression and present your ideas clearly and convincingly so having the confidence and skills to deliver an impactful message that maintains your audience's interest can make all the difference. At a recent event hosted by IPWIN, Kristina Wilfore, a political consultant who gives many talks and speeches through her work, gave us her tips and advice.

## WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

Many women communicate from an assumed non-dominant position, often diminishing and negating their words and impact. For instance, they “forget” to mention their achievements and begin by saying “they don’t know much about” whatever their subject is, or they speak with lesser volume and eye contact, or despite their many accomplishments they “hate” to speak in public. When women are nervous about speaking in public, the voice of women in the world is diminished. “I never meet a man who tells me he hates public speaking, ever, either because they have gotten over their fears, or they assume what they have to say is important for the world to hear. Women need to be just as bold,” says Kristina

Women also tend to use words that diminish their power; Stop using “just” such as “I just want to say”. “Just” demeans your power. While you are at it, drop the “actually”. “I actually have a question.” “I actually want to add something.” Are you actually surprised you have something meaningful to add? This is what the audience hears. Similarly, don’t tell us why what you are about to say is likely to be wrong. Don’t tell us you are going to “just take a minute” to say something. Don’t make your sentences sound like questions. Don’t substitute a question for a statement.

## ACCEPT THE FEAR

“Fear of public speaking is normal,” says Kristina. When you stand up in front of a crowd and their ears and eyes are focused on you, you’re making yourself vulnerable, so aiming for zero fear is unrealistic but it does not mean you cannot speak effectively. Great speakers don’t just speak, they also perform. “A good speaker should focus on the following; voice, body language, stage presence, eye contact, physical

appearance and the message,” advises Kristina. Use your voice as a tool, by using vocal variety, keeping your voice steady and not “up” talking. What you say is as important as how you say it.

## BODY LANGUAGE, BODY LANGUAGE, BODY LANGUAGE

Your body is a natural tool of communication, and a powerful one at that. Kristina says there are four main body language techniques you can employ.

**Movement and gestures:** Begin in a neutral position with hands at your sides. Gesture sparingly, using defined or “clean” hand movements; and make them strong.

**Using space:** When you speak in public, a certain amount of space on the stage is yours by right. You should claim it! Leaders know how to project power by the way they stand and move. Learn how to occupy space in a way that proclaims you’re comfortable in the spotlight.

**Facial expression.** “We might call this the forgotten relative in the family,” says Kristina. The human face is vital to communication, from recognising another person to understanding the subtle clues that underline motive. “Audience members depend upon your facial expressions to augment meaning.”

Make sure you maintain effective eye contact – five seconds per person, or if you are too nervous for that, stare at their forehead or just above. “When you don’t look people in the eye, they are less likely to look at you,” says Kristina. “And when they stop looking at you, they start thinking about something other than what you’re saying, and when that happens, they stop listening.” Focusing your eyes also helps.

## MANAGING THE AUDIENCE

When it comes to engaging the audience, Kristina identifies some common mistakes: “Reading directly from the notes or the screen, turning your back on the audience, slouching – hands in pockets, using “um, ah, you know”, nervous gestures, talking too fast or too quietly.” Instead, she recommends that you: “Manage your pace, break it up with engagement, ask and respond to questions, make it enjoyable, use the room, handle distractions”.