

How speech and language determine success in the workplace

Do you alter your speech patterns depending on the company you keep? Research shows that women who can speak like men in the boardroom will be more successful at work



Men and women adopt conventional speech patterns in gender divided labour markets Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images
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"Why can't a woman be more like a man?" So sang Rex Harrison in the 1964 film *My Fair Lady*, in his despair at 'training' Eliza Doolittle to be more presentable in high society. Perhaps women are becoming more like men if [Alison Wolf's latest book *The XX Factor*](#) is to be believed.

Wolf argues that one sixth of British women are on the "alpha track", busy smashing the glass ceiling with a strong interest in "power, influence, respect and money." These women love their jobs, which are a strong part of their identities, not just a way to make money. They also work hard out of the office – on themselves. Wolf says, "They go to the gym. They spend serious money at the hairdresser. They use Botox." The reason, she argues, is that like peacocks, they are engaged in serious competition to convince people they are competent, trustworthy and even superior.

My research on the language and appearance of female leaders shows that alpha women are embracing the masculine while skillfully preserving their identities as women. They competitively power-dress while emphasising that they are sexually attractive and feminine.

One female managing director I observed was chairing a meeting of men in grey suits. Her hair was brutally cropped into a less-than-gamine bob, yet she was wearing a bright red mini-dress. Another female chief executive I noted was virtually dressed like a man. She wore a severe, black skirt suit and her hair was a throwback to the 'short back and sides' era of the 1960s. Yet, when I peeped into her Gucci handbag, there was a hot-pink and silver purse.

In my recent research of 10 female and 10 male leaders chairing board meetings in UK FTSE companies, I noticed relatively few gender differences in their linguistic skillsets. On occasions, women will use authoritative, decisive and goal-driven language that we more typically associate with male leaders. Women will confront their work colleagues, speak directly and assertively, admonish and interrupt long-winded men if they want to make a contribution at a meeting. But they will also frame tough points politely, consider the feelings of others and engage in light banter to make colleagues feel at ease.

Men at the top are also using a much wider linguistic repertoire than they did in the past. Because of the de rigeur requirement for leaders to develop professional skills in "emotional intelligence", men are keen to demonstrate that they are in touch with their feminine side. But alpha women now have the edge because they constantly think about how they speak.

They judiciously draw on both masculine and feminine styles of language to create the right impact with their teams. As one female leader said, "I need to sound rather more assertive here, back off a little there. Draw this colleague out; put that colleague back in his place; it's a constant juggling act." When it comes to language, alpha women have a much more versatile repertoire than men. However this superiority comes at a hefty price. Wolf argues that in top jobs – law, finance, business – gender segregation, right across the affluent world, has more or less disappeared; but in low-paid jobs,

such as care work, it mostly hasn't. Alpha females are benefitting at the expense of a vast underclass of women who do their housework, nursemaid their children and care for their ageing parents.

My research shows that the majority of women and men still use conventional speech patterns in the traditional gender-divided labour markets: builders will talk macho and women will gossip. Gender expectations on how people talk in traditional work roles remain strong.

Men are men only by sounding like men, which involves giving orders, disagreeing, boasting, swearing, trading insults and bawdy jokes. Women talk like women: they chat, listen, tease, gossip, disclose, confess, apologise and agree. In short, they construct their disempowerment through their talk. In this new world with its new inequalities, the ability to talk like a man will pay dividends for alpha women only. Because they have the XXY factor.

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