

JUDITH HUMPHREY

Taking *the* Stage

How Women Can Speak Up,
Stand Out, and Succeed

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TAKING THE STAGE

HOW WOMEN CAN
SPEAK UP, STAND OUT,
AND SUCCEED

Judith Humphrey

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“The ability to speak in front of a group is a very important tool. *Taking the Stage* teaches you that your opinions are as valuable as anyone else’s. I have certainly seen members of my team more willing to speak up after participating in the ‘Taking the Stage’ program.”

—Richard Nesbitt, CEO, world markets, and COO, CIBC

“The ‘Taking the Stage’ program has profoundly impacted IBM women at all levels, encouraging them to speak up, communicate for impact, and become essential to their clients.”

—Lauren O’Donnell, global general manager and vice president,
life sciences industry, IBM

“It is with excitement that I endorse Judith Humphrey’s book. She is an excellent communicator and I wish her every success in delivering her powerful and helpful messages to a wide audience. *Taking the Stage* will touch thousands of women around the world in the most positive ways.”

—Micheline Bouchard, former CEO, Motorola Canada,
and board member, International Women’s Forum

“Over the past 10 years, our firm has been reporting on the unacceptably low numbers of women in senior executive positions. Those figures will change dramatically—for the better!—when women read Judith Humphrey’s compelling new book, *Taking the Stage*. I will certainly be recommending it to all my female clients, and to those who have women on their teams.”

—Jay Rosenzweig, CEO, Rosenzweig & Company

“I love *Taking the Stage*. It spoke to me profoundly as I read it while on the subway in Seoul. It showed that we can embrace both the yin and yang, the female and male aspects of our natures. I truly believe that when we are able to harness both, we become better, stronger leaders. Judith Humphrey’s brilliant book will show readers how to do just that.”

—Sharon Tan, vice president, HR/OD,
Asia, Grohe Pacific PTE LTD

*For Marc, my wonderful husband, who has always believed in me.
For Bart and Ben, who have shown that a woman can have bright,
happy, and cherished children and a successful career.*

Preface

This book grows out of my conviction that confident self-expression is the foundation of success in business and life. I have seen the lives of thousands of women transformed when they learned to “take the stage.” Graduates of our firm’s Taking the Stage® program have found—as readers of this book will discover—how to *speak up, stand out, and succeed* in ways that increase their visibility, earn them respect, and accelerate their advancement. Many inspiring stories of those who have achieved these goals fill the pages of this book. I’m pleased to share with readers the insights from our program, from my twenty-five years as head of a communications company, and from my own life.

How do you know if this book is for you? If you would like a stronger voice in discussions; if you wish to express yourself with more clarity and impact; if you want others not to interrupt you because they don’t “hear” you; if you’d like to be assertive but not aggressive, promote yourself, be visible, speak with presence, and move your career forward by showing yourself as a confident, capable leader—if you say “yes” to any of these, then this book is for you. *Taking the Stage* is a metaphor for all the ways you can be your own best champion by finding compelling ways to express yourself. Whatever your rank, position, or industry, this book is for all women who want to claim their right to confident self-expression and respect from others in the boardroom—and beyond. The rewards are enormous. So, take the stage!

This is a book for *women*, but it is also for *those who support women’s success*. It is for leaders of women who want to build stronger, more diverse

teams, or who have wives, female partners, or daughters they would like to see succeed. Men have told me, “I want a copy of this book for my wife, who can project more confidence,” and “This would be useful for my daughter who is very smart but doesn’t interview well.” More broadly, this work is for anyone who cares about women, the future of young women, and the value that women can add to every business, profession, community, and family—when they do speak up and stand out as strong, confident leaders.

The message of this book is that women must take the stage if they want to have a greater impact on their organizations and greater success in their careers and lives. That journey into the spotlight requires a “center-stage mindset” and the ability to communicate in an inspiring, effective way. Success for women also requires support from their bosses, mentors, and sponsors. Executives and senior managers who lead women will find at the end of each chapter “Advice for Leaders of Women” that will enable them to support and coach the women in their lives and reinforce the teachings in this work.

Taking the Stage provides readers with a *proven, practical* approach developed by The Humphrey Group in our work with women. My own experience coaching and training was the starting point in my thinking that women must be stronger communicators if they want to succeed—at work and in life. I encouraged each woman I coached to be bolder, stronger, and more confident in her communications—skills that this book teaches. Today our firm has thirty-five instructors and coaches who work with both men and women to make them more confident, inspiring communicators and leaders. Our business is global, and our results are impressive. The ideas, techniques, and successes described in this text reflect our work with clients.

The book also embodies the experience of the many women who have attended our Taking the Stage program—or facilitated it—in locations around the world. I have come to know some of these women personally. Many others have generously shared their growth and courage with me in phone interviews, conference calls, and emails. The women whose stories appear in this book come from all geographies, all industries, and all levels of their organizations. In most cases, I’ve changed their names and personal details to protect their privacy. But the words and experiences they contributed are accurately reflected in the quoted passages. I am grateful

to these brave women—this book could never have been written without their inspiring stories. *Taking the Stage* is based on original research—our “lab” being The Humphrey Group’s work with women and our feedback from firms where more than four hundred thousand women have graduated from our *Taking the Stage* program. This has given us a powerful source of insight that has shaped our assumptions about how women communicate in business and beyond.

Taking the Stage also complements an impressive recent body of literature that emphasizes the communications challenges women face and their need to speak up more boldly and successfully. These works include Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, Barbara Annis and John Gray’s *Work with Me*, and Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s *The Confidence Code*. These works continue the debate about whether women’s communication style is a reflection of “nature” or “nurture.” But even with this diversity of viewpoints there is consensus that women *can take action* to build their own confidence and strengthen their voices in ways that will have a positive and sustained impact on their lives. *Taking the Stage* focuses on the ACTIONS women can take to develop stronger, more powerful voices and achieve confident communications leadership in all situations—whether they are making a presentation, chatting at a networking event, or pitching an idea.

This book emerges from my own personal journey as well. *Taking the Stage* is a metaphor for my life. Growing up in a small town in Connecticut, I dreamed of the vast world “out there” and was determined to find a bigger “stage” on which to express myself. The courage that I developed allowed me to move from one field to another: from music, to university teaching, to the corporate world, and finally to my own company. Each stage was larger and filled with more opportunity—though it was never easy transitioning from one stage to the next. And now, looking back, I see that all the qualities I discuss in this book—such as assertiveness, confidence, and a willingness to speak up—were necessary and gradually became part of my self-definition. So this book reflects hard-earned passages in my own life.

Finally, this book deals with qualities and desires deep within all of us. It is our birthright to be heard. We were born with voices—loud, penetrating voices—and there is absolutely no reason why women should feel obliged to surrender those voices in the face of obstacles. This book is ultimately an affirmation of our life force.

TAKING THE STAGE

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Introduction

In January 2001, I sat down to prepare a speech that I would deliver to 350 women managers and executives. Though I had enthusiastically accepted this opportunity to promote my firm, I felt a pang of regret after agreeing to speak.

The prospect was daunting. Although I had spoken to smaller groups of forty or fifty people, I had never addressed such a large business audience. I wouldn't be able to "chat" with them as I did with more intimate gatherings; I might not even be able to see them, with the stage lights in my eyes. To add to the pressure, my company—The Humphrey Group—had spent the past decade teaching *others* how to speak. Many of the women in my audience were executives who recently had received speech coaching from us—or from *me personally*. They'd likely expect flawless execution from me as head of the firm. Despite the fact that I'd prepared and rehearsed several times, I took the podium with some trepidation.

No wonder my opening words were: "Talk about pressure!" I added that now "the shoe—or the high heel—was on the other foot," because I was the one being scrutinized. That moment of honesty grounded me and made them laugh. I went on to tell the women in the room that "this is what it means to take the stage." I continued, "Every time you walk up to that podium, or stand in front of an audience, or meet with a client or a boss, there are expectations that you'll influence and inspire your listeners." I then introduced my main message: "While we women all too often are reluctant to take the stage, we can and *must* do so if we want to realize our capacity for leadership."¹

The speech was an awakening for me—a realization that I *did* have it in me to take the stage in front of such a large group. The speech was transformational for my audience because so many in the room had never heard this message before. The concept of “taking the stage” had come to me as a result of all the coaching I and my colleagues had provided to women. Initially, we had trained mostly men—C-suite executives who wanted to be superb speakers. Gradually, as more and more women entered the picture, it became obvious that—unlike many of the men we’d trained—women were uncomfortable in the spotlight. We realized that they needed special encouragement to overcome their sense of inadequacy, put themselves out there, and speak as strong, confident leaders.

This was the first time I had delivered that message, and there was stillness in the room as I spoke. I had never seen such rapt attention. Afterward, the attendees approached me and urged me to create a seminar that would show them and the women reporting to them how to take the stage. We now offer that seminar both publicly and in-house to our client companies.

I am grateful to the women who were in that room that day and for the tens of thousands of women around the world who have attended our Taking the Stage program since then. They have taught me about the deep desire so many women have to express themselves more fully and more confidently. They have shown me the power of this book’s message: women must come out from the wings and take the stage if they want to have a greater impact on their organizations and their own careers.

Overview of the Book

I’ve written this book so women can find their own strong voices, seize new opportunities to lead, and advance their careers. If women lack confidence, as Katty Kay and Claire Shipman make clear in their superb book, *The Confidence Code*, then it’s time for women to take action on their own behalf.² *Taking the Stage* puts forth a compelling strategy for reversing traditional female socialization, thereby helping us become more comfortable in the spotlight. It will show you how to take your

rightful place on the corporate stage to advance yourself and your ideas. The Humphrey Group's work with tens of thousands of women for more than twenty-five years has given us a powerful source of insight that has shaped our assumptions about how women communicate in business and beyond.

The book has four parts.

Part 1 discusses how you can "Choose to Take the Stage." Here you will learn how to take the stage *mentally*. It all begins with the conscious choice to come out from the wings and be fearless in your desire to be heard, every day—even when others may not agree with you. It means finding the confidence to accept that others want to see, hear, and be led by you. You'll discover how to silence that inner voice that says "You shouldn't speak up now," or "You can't add any value to this discussion." You will learn how to feel comfortable speaking up, discussing your accomplishments, showing courage, and holding your ground when others seek to undercut you or dissuade you from taking the stage.

Part 2 shows readers how to "Create a Strong Script"—either one that's written or one that's simply in your mind. Here you will discover how to take the stage *verbally*. Every time we speak—whether at the podium, at meetings, in one-on-one encounters, or on the phone—we create scripts. Sometimes we only have time to create a brief mental outline of what we want to say; in other instances we can put pen to paper. Whatever the format, your script should portray you and your ideas in the best light. Unfortunately, many women undermine their leadership by crafting weak scripts that call attention to their perceived inadequacies, or present them as perpetually busy, always sorry, often worried, confused, or stressed. A woman might say, "I'm sorry, it was my fault," "Don't mind me, I'm having a bad day," "I'm buried in work." This part of the book will show you how to script yourself as a confident leader, not only with strong language, but also with a clear message, a persuasive structure, an opening grabber that gets the audience's attention, and a closing call to action. You will learn how to craft compelling scripts for all situations—from formal meetings and career discussions to elevator conversations.

Part 3 explains how to “Unlock the Power of Your Voice.” Here you will discover how to take the stage *vocally*. We should use our voices as instruments of leadership; yet many women reduce this power by softening or sweetening their tones, or rushing so no one can interrupt them. They also often lift their voices at the end of sentences, which makes them sound as though they are asking a question rather than speaking decisively. Such “upspeak” makes women sound unsure of themselves. This part will teach you to overcome such minimizing vocal patterns and reclaim the true power of your voice.

Part 4 shows you how to “Stand Out on Stage.” Here you will learn how to take the stage *physically*. Having a strong physical presence is important for leaders and shows others that you are confident and capable. Women often project a less than confident physical presence. Their minimizing body language can involve everything from poor posture, small gestures, and furtive or weak eye contact to ingratiating facial expressions and clothing that distracts from their leadership. This part of the book shows you how to project a strong, self-affirming physical presence.

In sum, the four parts of the book will make clear how to take the stage *mentally, verbally, vocally, and physically*.

This book does not advocate that women try to become men or simply agree to play by men’s rules. Rather, *Taking the Stage* calls on women to develop a more forceful approach to leadership and to make certain that their voices and ideas are heard. Self-confidence and assertiveness do not belong to men alone, although these qualities are often associated with the “male” style of leadership. Such strengths are a woman’s birthright, too.

Nor does arguing that women need to become bolder and more assertive suggest that we should dismiss the special qualities women bring to their leadership. Dr. Judy Rosener writes in a *Harvard Business Review* article, “Ways Women Lead,” that “effective leaders don’t come from one mold . . . [Women’s] nontraditional leadership style is well suited to the conditions of some work environments and can increase an organization’s chances of surviving in an uncertain world.”³ Indeed, women’s collaborative style of leadership is critical to today’s organizations. Women listen well, demonstrate empathy, work well together, and

can be extremely supportive. Women are also more likely to develop other women.⁴ In their book *The Athena Doctrine*, John Gerzema and Michael D'Antonio aptly conclude that “the world would be a better place if men thought more like women.”⁵

But by themselves, the “female” qualities of leadership can produce an overemphasis on *others* and an underemphasis on *ourselves*. With such a focus, many women lose out on jobs, promotions, kudos, air time, and power. Women need to supplement their “female” approach with the self-assertiveness that men display. If women follow the path recommended in this book, they will be embracing both what we think of as “male” and “female” qualities and achieving a holistic leadership style.

How difficult will it be for women to develop this new style of leadership, which combines “male” and “female” qualities? And to put the issue more broadly, how difficult will it be for corporate cultures to change? Some assert that there are “social norms that are so gendered and so stereotyped that even though we think we’ve gone past them, we really haven’t.”⁶ But in the firms that want to make progress in this area, much has been accomplished. Changing the course of history—or corporate history—is not easy. It’s time now for women to move beyond negative assumptions and look to themselves for the courage and determination needed to rise through the ranks and create a new model for female leadership.

Male leaders also have a vested interest in this positive transformation of female leadership. John Montalbano, chief executive officer of RBC Global Asset Management, told me in an interview, “If you have a strong culture, the professionals in your organization have a keen interest in winning. Winning ultimately means having the best talent around the table. And when you identify great talent regardless of gender or race, you must foster it and allow it to have a meaningful contribution within the organization.”

Our Time Is Now!

Why is the need for this book so pressing? In some respects women have made great strides. Women today are more educated and professionally ready than they have ever been. Young women are now more likely than young men to enroll in and graduate from higher education.⁷ Women