



## Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Public Speaking *The new breakthrough skill to women's career success*

### Background

Women continue to trail men in achieving leadership roles in American business. A recent study by Zoom Info looked at executives by gender in 13 industries.

The study found:

- Out of 178,650 CEOs, 83.7% were male and 16.3% were female
- Out of 465,600 Vice Presidents, 73.5% were male and 27.5% were female

With gaps narrowing in education and years of experience, what other factors are key to putting more women in the executive suite?

### The Survey

In a 2007 survey conducted by Speak for Success of 100 executive women in California, **public speaking skill, including the ability to communicate ideas with confidence, to persuade, lead meetings and projects** was cited as one of the single most critical predictors of professional and personal success by a significant majority of the women surveyed. More than education, experience, or technical expertise, mastering the skill of public speaking puts women on equal footing with men in the workplace.

The Speak for Success Public Speaking Skills survey asked the participants to answer questions designed to learn how important the women felt their public speaking skills had been to their career success. The survey explored whether these high achieving women somehow possessed different skills or abilities than other professionals who feel the more typical anxiety, nervousness, and fear when asked to speak to a group.

### Speak for Success asked the executive women to describe:

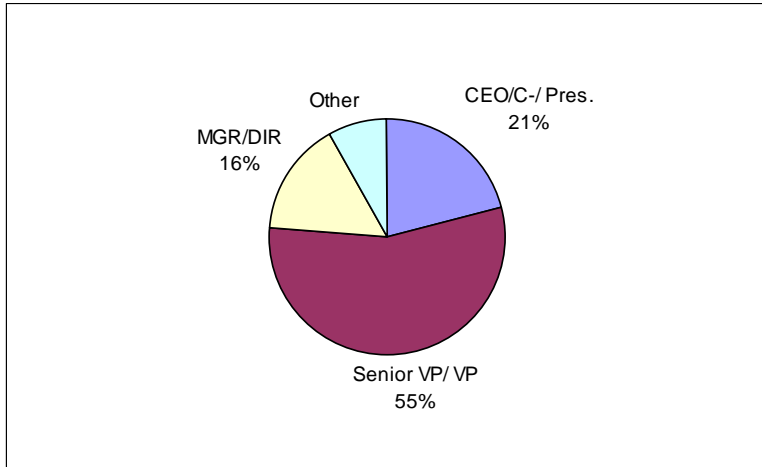
- How effective they are when speaking to groups
- How much of their career success can be attributed to good speaking skills
- What they do to calm their fears or nerves before an important presentation
- How long it takes for them to feel comfortable when giving a presentation
- What kind of business presentation training or education they have had
- Whether speaking effectively to groups influences the promotion of women into management roles

# OUR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

## Job Title

Over three-quarters of the 100 women surveyed hold titles of CEO or President, Senior Vice President or Vice President.

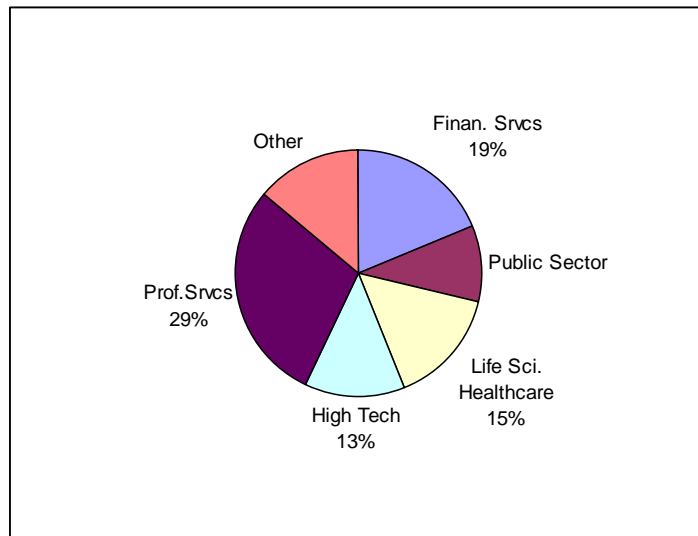
The remaining participants hold titles including Manager, Director, or other.



## Industries Represented

Over one-quarter of the women surveyed work in Professional Services; another 28% are in Life Sciences, Healthcare, and High Tech. 10% work in the Public Sector and 19% work in the Financial Services arena.

Public Sector includes Education, Non-profit and Government. Professional Services includes Recruiting, Consulting, Marketing and Public Relations.



## KEY FINDING 1

Public Speaking skills are a “must have”  
and not a “nice to have”  
for professional women today.

There is no doubt that the women surveyed consider the ability to demonstrate leadership through public speaking as a necessity and *not* a luxury in determining career success.

- Virtually every participant considered **public speaking skills** critical to her own career success (95%).
- Numerous participants cited instances when delivering effective presentations contributed to significant business accomplishments including raising capital, increased sales, motivating employees and colleagues, and persuading an organization to adopt their proposals or ideas.
- Participants say their communication skills have given them added visibility among senior management, increasing opportunities for career advancement.

### **How important has the skill of speaking to groups been to your career success?**

95% said it was important to critical for their success.

*My presentations to our Board of Directors have earned their respect and confidence in my abilities and my promotion to Director level. **Director, Manufacturing***

*I have been told that because of my passion for speaking and my ability to fully engage the crowds - I get chosen for projects (probably simply because other people have such a fear of speaking). I may not be the highest level person, or the smartest - but because of my natural ability to articulate I've been given roles "beyond" my experience.*

**Vice President, Financial Services**

*I regularly get clients who've heard me speak at conferences, which contributes to over 50% of my income. **Consultant***

*Serving as a volunteer chairperson for an event allowed me to use my presentation skills and gain visibility among executives who recruited me for my current job.*

**Vice President, Education**

*I was recruited into my current position by one of my students, who was the staffing supervisor for the company. **Vice President, Healthcare***

## KEY FINDING 2

To combat anxiety and nerves, women leaders focus on the results their presentation will produce.

Just because these executive women are accomplished communicators doesn't mean they don't have nerves or anxiety when speaking. Even the most experienced speakers can be uncomfortable. But these women push forward and within a few short minutes settle into a "comfort zone" where they focus on their audience and the delivery of their message.

What sets these women apart from others is their willingness to feel the anxiety and discomfort and push through to the other side. They see the rewards of public speaking as greater than the pain. Their career success confirms that this is true.

- Two of the top fears cited in virtually all studies are dying and giving a speech. But no one ever died from giving a presentation (as far as we know!).
- The majority (84%) of those surveyed practice their presentations, and two-thirds of those who practice go through their presentation more than once.
- Virtually all of our participants use a simple but effective preparation process and strategies such as back-up plans to ensure their success.

### **What do you do to calm your fears or ease your nerves before an important presentation? (respondents chose as many as applied)**

58% Practice many times  
57% Arrive early  
55% Visualize my success  
37% Have a back up plan  
26% Practice once

**2% imagine their audience in their underwear**

Here are a few other strategies that have worked for our survey participants:

- Know my material and remind myself that I'm the expert of the topic
- Start by saying something to make everyone laugh
- Enlist the help of others to do a dry run with an audience

### **After you start a presentation, how long does it take for your nerves to calm down and for you to feel comfortable?**

48% said within a minute or less  
28% said within the first five minutes  
5% said their nerves stay with them the whole time  
3% said they weren't nervous

## KEY FINDING 3

If Public Speaking skills were not learned in high school or college, it's not too late.

While most of these successful women executives rated their speaking skills as “better than average,” they don’t take the need to excel at these skills for granted. Public Speaking Education and Training are their keys to communication success.

- The vast majority of the executive women surveyed have pursued one or more types of professional development courses to learn and improve their presentation skills.
- Very few of the women surveyed consider themselves naturally gifted speakers. As a result, they have sought training after college to develop effective communication skills.
- Three-quarters of the women surveyed rate their presentation skills as “better than average.” Several commented that they found training to be key to their personal and professional success.
- **A significant number of the employers of the women surveyed consider presentation skills training so critical to success that they provide it for their employees, and 41% of those surveyed have taken advantage of the training – more than any other method of learning these skills.**

### **What training or education have you had to give effective business presentations?**

41% have participated in a company sponsored Presentation Skills workshop  
35% have participated in other professional development seminars  
35% took Public Speaking in College  
12% participated in Toastmasters  
7% were on their High School Debate team

*I always had the brains as the CEOs of the companies I worked for always told me, but the fear of public speaking always held me back. However being involved in a lot of associations, I slowly gained confidence. I took several public speaking courses. This was the turning point, because I learned not to be conscious of my accent. In fact, from what I found out it was a differentiator and that was why I was successful...that was enough to get me going and I am not stopping until I am able to walk anywhere and pick up the microphone easily!* **Vice President, Financial Services**

*I had to make a presentation before a large group that included the city manager and council members. The PowerPoint failed, yet thru practice and skills training and adrenaline I was able to make the best presentation I ever gave. I had the worst migraine after it though from the stress.* **Human Resources Manager, City Government**

## KEY FINDING 4

Public Speaking skills are the “breakthrough” skills that create new opportunities for women.

When a woman is ready and able to step forward and speak with confidence, opportunities present themselves. These women share great examples of how being visible and heard has helped their careers and brought them professional success that otherwise may not have happened.

*A conference speaker got sick at the 11th hour and I was asked to step in. That gave me national exposure in my industry and provided me invaluable networking opportunities. I was also asked to speak at subsequent conferences. **Vice President, Publishing***

*I was asked to speak for a professional organization a while back. In the audience were several CEOs of large companies. They 1) asked me to speak to their employees and, 2) referred business to me because of my ability to speak effectively, directly, and with passion! **Senior Director, Education***

*Public speaking is a key component of my agency's business development strategy. **President, Professional Services***

*Leading groups in the community. Keynotes for business development and company branding. **COO, Professional Services***

Our industry is all about sharing information on how to survive difficult financial times amidst ever-changing regulation and legislation. I do not have one example but clearly we cannot survive or thrive in this business without being able to articulate complex and comprehensive business solutions. **President, Healthcare**

### **Please rate your ability to speak effectively to groups.**

73% said they are better than average with 27% of those saying they do a great job!

*I would hold monthly communication meetings with 100+ attendees. It provided me the opportunity to practice my presentation skills while passing along information that made them feel a part of the company. It made a difference in the results of the work and helped to move the company forward. **Vice President, High Tech Manufacturing***

## KEY FINDING 5

Public Speaking skills are the  
“breakthrough” skills that allow women to  
shatter the glass ceiling

Our survey participants describe how public speaking skills have helped them reach the very top of the organizations that they now lead.

**What one example could you share that has helped you get to your current role that is a direct result of your ability to speak to groups?**

*These skills helped me get increased funding to my organization, going from a single city organization with one funding source to a regional organization with 10 public funding sources. **CEO, Hospitality***

*Making presentations for RFP requirements for major organizations. **President, Professional Services***

*I was hired to this new role in part due to the evangelism role I play as a result of my ability to craft compelling presentations and speak effectively about vision and big ideas. **Senior Vice President & General Manager, High Tech***

*My current position required several presentations to win the job. In my leadership work in non-profits I had to be able to motivate, inspire and lead large numbers of volunteers by publicly speaking to them. **CEO, Non-Profit***

*IPO Experience, which required many, many presentations to Wall Street. **COO, Healthcare***

*Corporate presentations to the board of directors on difficult topics. At the other end of speaking, master of ceremony duties for company's holiday events. **President, Professional Services***

*I wouldn't be CEO if I didn't know how to be persuasive! **CEO, Professional Services***

*When I speak to groups, regardless of the topic, the feedback I receive is that my message is clear, palatable, and solution-focused. People trust me to present an issue, dissect the parts, and then lead them to the desire to take action. **President, Professional Services***

*My ability to speak effectively with and influence management teams (in a former company) led to an opportunity at my current company because I had worked with one of the leaders before. **CLO, Life Sciences***

**My Conclusions**  
**Dana Bristol-Smith, President**



Effective communication and presentation skills are considered a must for an outstanding business leader. While many employees may get by and are successful due to their technical skills and grasp of business fundamentals, leadership skills quickly distinguish the stars.

**Women who excel at public speaking are seen to be highly qualified leaders in the workplace.**

Over 20% of our survey participants were women who are at the pinnacle of success. They have broken through the glass ceiling. They are Presidents, Chief Executives, Operations, and Learning Officers who along with their technical knowledge, education, and expertise have set themselves apart from other women in management by their ability to deliver effective presentations.

Public speaking skills also benefit women entrepreneurs. We've seen from the survey that many women executives from Professional Services firms use public speaking as part of their business development strategy.

The Center for Women's Business Research says that the state of California ranks #1 in the United States for number of privately-held women owned businesses. The number of majority women-owned firms are growing at a rate nearly twice the U.S. average, contribute \$1.1 trillion in revenues to the economy, and create jobs for 7.2 million Americans.

Today's women leaders are the role models that we have never had before. They are leading by example and being taken seriously. They are lighting the way for more women to rise in their own career success and providing them the examples and inspiration to get there.

To Success!

*Dana Bristol-Smith*

**About Speak for Success**

Based in San Diego, California, Speak for Success provides training and coaching services to help professionals in executive, management, sales and technical roles be more effective and successful in their business communications, both verbally and in writing. Speak for Success's clientele includes some of California's largest biotech, high-tech, financial services, healthcare, telecommunications and professional services businesses and organizations. To learn more, call 760-726-5272, email [info@speakforsuccess.com](mailto:info@speakforsuccess.com), or visit [www.speakforsuccess.com](http://www.speakforsuccess.com)