

When Hillary speaks

By Maggie H. Richardson (Contact)

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In the early '90s, when Gov. Bill Clinton's presidential candidacy was in its infancy and before the conversation turned to state troopers and skirt-chasing, there was one thing observers on both sides noticed: His wife was impressive. She wasn't just any candidate's wife. She was smart, knew the issues and she had great speaking skills.

Those salad days, when most of the country was just getting to know Hillary Clinton, seem like ancient history. Everything's under the microscope now, including the same speaking techniques that used to earn her kudos. The more public she's become, the more her speaking skills have been scrutinized, particularly when she's compared to her husband—or her chief rival, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama.

Think what you will about Hillary, and fall where you may on the political spectrum, but it's a good time for women to observe candidate Clinton's successes and failures behind the podium. More than ever, public speaking is a skill thought to directly relate to a professional woman's ability to advance.

"We have found that public speaking skills help women not only earn respect, but get promoted," says Dana Bristol-Smith, a veteran public speaking coach and the founder of Speak for Success, a San Diego-based consulting firm that coaches executives to become better speakers.

In a survey Bristol-Smith conducted last year among 100 female CEOs or vice presidents, 95% said speaking skills were critical to their career success. Furthermore, the survey found that women who excel at public speaking were seen to be "highly qualified leaders."

"For women, public speaking skills are a 'must-have,' not a 'nice-to-have' skill," she says.

I asked Bristol-Smith what we could learn from Hillary Clinton's recent performances.

"I think what's made her effective has also hurt her," Bristol-Smith says. "She can be very direct—too direct—sometimes."

Bristol-Smith says while women have been told to assert themselves and appear confident, it's important to balance authority with approachability.

Clinton's perceived lack of charm is exacerbated by the constant juxtaposition of her with Obama, whose rise-and-fall speaking style comes naturally. Male speakers have an easier time with this sort of oratory, Bristol-Smith says, simply by virtue of their longer vocal chords.

"They can project and sound authoritative without sounding harsh," she says.

If Clinton is on the short end of vocal resonance, she tries to make up for it through the use of authoritative language, Bristol-Smith says.

"We hear her say 'I' a lot to showcase her skills and experience," she says.

On the other hand, Bristol-Smith says, Obama's "yes, we can" refrain has not only made crowds feel included, it's literally sparked their participation.

"You hear him saying 'you' and 'we' a lot," she says. "When you do this, you connect with your audience."

The national media has commented how Clinton's humanity, apparent in small groups or relaxed formats, doesn't come across when she's speaking to large audiences. I concur. Last June, I heard Clinton speak to a crowd of around 200 in New Hampshire in a stem cell research roundtable at Dartmouth College.

She spoke without notes or a teleprompter. She was natural and extremely well-prepared. She didn't fall into her constant use of the verbal crutch "you know," which so often peppers her responses to reporters. She called on and listened intently to audience members, then answered their questions thoroughly. She even cracked jokes.

In short, she seemed authentic, something Bristol-Smith says female executives should integrate



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into their presentation styles.

"I coach people to bring their personalities with them," she says. "Sometimes people are so focused on the message that they don't smile or connect with the audience. Audiences want to have a reason to connect."

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