

# Savvy & Influential Communication

## Tips

Strong communication skills are key for any successful executive. QS TopExecutive Editor, Dawn Z Bournand spoke with communication expert for women in business, Kay White to get her tips on how you can most effectively use the power of words to speak up, be present and fully heard.

Q

**What is your background and what led you to specialize in business communication?**

I come from 25 years of insurance brokering so I am very much corporate in my experience. I started as a secretary at 18. I left school, went straight into the second largest insurance broker in the world, Willis, and worked my way up from secretary to become a divisional director in the Global Property area.

I was one of six professional women at the time and I say “professional” in that we were actually negotiating and brokering business rather than admin support. Through that period of time, I learned so much about how to and how not to negotiate, ask for what you want, and tell people the tough stuff. Some of it worked really well, and some of it really didn’t. All along, not necessarily knowingly, I was picking up clues and being told I was really brilliant at certain things and needing to develop in other areas.

It was a very male environment. I like working with men; a team of women has a whole different dynamic to a whole team of men and the combination of men and women in a team was hugely important. I learned so much about the different ways that men and women operate.

Whilst I now work most often with women who are running their own businesses, I also do a lot of work within corporations to support various women’s networks and help women to step up but still be themselves. That’s the key.

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**In the Executive MBA classroom, just as in a company, it is important to have that mix you talked about of both men and women. Many of the programs seek women to join so they can get the stimulating conversations going and the opinions of both genders. Why is this helpful?**

It has been proven that mixed gender teams are more profitable. Mixed gender teams make more money. There is definitely a balance in how women tend to be more collaborative and want to make sure the relationships are working and how men can cut straight to the chase and make decisions. Interestingly, men do this in a different way when women are around, so it doesn’t become a ‘testosterone-fuelled’ environment that can become so competitive as opposed to collaborative.

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**Your work is about using the right words. How important are they and what power do they have? How are you working with women to become ‘savvy communicators’ and to use language to their advantage?**

My whole angle is savvy and influential communication. That word, “influential,” is in there for a reason. “Savvy” is based on the French word “savoir” – to know; to have a bit of smarts, of knowing. The savvy piece is about being flexible and thinking, planning ahead and not necessarily going straight to what you want. Lots of women say to me, “Well, how am I going to say this, this, and this?”

I say to them, “Well, you’re going to tell them this instead and this is why and this is what happens when you do,” versus the immediate, direct route because that’s where relationship breaks come in and that’s where [people get] upset and emotional fallout can often happen.

The influential piece is about how understanding and sharing can persuade in a way that makes it all about what the other person wants. They then actually want to do things themselves versus because you told them to. Anyone who’s a parent will understand this.

Q

**What are some of the issues that women come to you with? What do your clients seek to resolve through learning with you?**

There are common themes that come up and it’s interesting because having worked within large organizations – banks and institutes – where women are being encouraged to come forward, one of the main questions is: “Now that I’m more senior, I need to portray that role rather than being ‘one of the girls’. How do I balance that?”

Another common theme is speaking up in meetings with credibility and without too much detail – women tend to often get stuck in a lot of detail. I often hear, “I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t have anything to say.” Well, there’s always something to say and you often find that if you analyze the people who stand out in meetings or seem to be sort of running the show, they’re often not saying a huge amount as far as content but they’re showing up. They’re allowing themselves to be seen to be asking questions and collaborating. So it doesn’t always have to be about knowing the answer.

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**This idea of “showing up” is such an important one. Simply being there and asserting your presence. It’s not being arrogant or trying to grab the spotlight from anyone else. So, how can women “show up”?**

There are a variety of ways and some work better than others. One of the quickest routes is giving yourself permission. “Permission to engage”, as one of my colleagues who used to be a female combat pilot likes to say. Then you don’t have to say, “Can I just sit here,” or you’ll hear a lot of women say, “Is it okay if I just,” or, “I hope you don’t mind but could I,” or, “It’s only Kay.”



**Kay White** of wayforwardsolutions.com is known as the Savvy & Influential Communication Expert for Women in Business. Kay shows professional women how to express their value, position their skills and speak up in business so they’re heard. By using the words, phrases and confidence-boosting mindsets Kay shares, her clients comfortably and confidently attract more income and opportunity, all while being true to themselves. It’s less about empowering women and more about showing women how – and why – to use the power and influence they already have to boost their career and businesses.

You hear it? “Sorry to interrupt you, but...” – this is a permission thing. It’s brought from politesse, from being too polite and speaking when you’re spoken to. Assuming that you have to ask permission versus what a lot of men are brought up to believe: you have permission until you’re told you don’t. In which case, you’ll be prepared to apologize. “Oh, I’m sorry, I thought that was okay,” whereas women like to check they’re not going to upset anyone first or step on anyone’s toes. By doing that, they cede their power in that moment – subconsciously for both parties.

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**There is the saying “It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission,” and I think men are quite good at that but women are still getting comfortable with it. I’m stereotyping, of course, but, in general do you find this to be true?**

Indeed, and the interesting thing here, in the context of TopExecutive readers, is to have got to the level of an Executive MBA. To assume that you’re going to use your degree and how it can very much add to pushing you forward, is to give yourself permission to use it. A qualification is just a qualification. Until you actively use it, and as I like to say “put it on and wear it and own it,” it’s just another qualification.

Editor’s note: This is just part of our insightful interview with Kay White. If you would like to hear the entire interview, go to [www.topmba.com/emba](http://www.topmba.com/emba) to listen in on more of Kay White’s savvy and influential communication tips.