

Speak **STRONG**

Say what you MEAN.

MEAN what you say.

**Don't be MEAN
when you say it.**

MERYL RUNION

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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I can't talk about that because they...

Skill #3: Uncover eight lame excuses (and one shameful one)

Can you believe they bought it?

In 1999, *Candid Camera* filmed an actor playing a doctor inoculating employees for the Y2K bug in a corporate break room. The employees rolled up their sleeves one by one for the vaccination. No one questioned the authority of a “doctor” vaccinating them against a computer virus.

I watched incredulous. Don't they get it? You don't get vaccinated for a computer virus! How could they be so blinded by a white coat and stethoscope?

It's easy to laugh at their folly. Yet you and I have stayed silent against our better judgment for reasons that couldn't pass the smell test either.

Endless tales of unspoken truths

The stories abound. There's the shipping agent who followed his boss' instructions to dispatch a crate to Portland, Oregon even though he knew the client was in Portland, Maine. There's the manager who tolerated a worker's offensive body odor for five years because they didn't want to offend the offender. (Catch the irony?) There's the employee who quit because he was unwilling to risk angering her boss by asking for a raise.

Then there's the business owner who ignored his favorite employee's incompetence. (Never mind that the other overworked employees had to pick up the slack.) There's the gentle soul who never confronted an issue in her life and wasn't about to start now, even though her coworker had stolen her idea. She wouldn't know what to say or how to say it anyway.

Oh, yes, there's the employee who figured if the new marketing campaign was as bad as it sounded to her, someone else at the meeting surely would have said so. And there's the wife who assumed every time her opinion differed from her husband's, he must know something she didn't. And there's an employee who never pointed out the accounting error because that error meant extra money in his own pocket.

So many excuses — so little time

We've all made excuses for not speaking up about errors, incompetence and issues. I've done it, I've seen it and so have you. That's why the 1999 *Candid Camera* episode shouldn't have surprised me.

That's also why I am surprised and delighted when someone drops the excuses and speaks up.

“*A misleading silence
is as dishonest as
a misleading word.*”

MERYL RUNION

Dos, Don'ts and Tips, Skill #3:

Uncover eight lame excuses (and one shameful one)

How do you excuse your silence? Let us count the ways.

There are eight lame excuses and one shameful excuse for staying silent when something needs to be said. We'll look more closely at how to overcome these excuses in later chapters. Now I'll help you uncover the ones you hide behind.

1. The *misplaced respect for authority* lame excuse

Do you hesitate to question a perceived authority even when your own knowledge contradicts what they say?

Don't: under or overvalue experience and/or position.

Why not? People have authority for a reason, and experience adds to accuracy—but authorities are not infallible and experience does not mean all knowing.

Do: examine your interaction with anyone you respect, admire and emulate. Notice if you ever dismiss your own knowing for theirs.

Why? You are responsible for your own choices. If you make a poor choice because you listened to an “expert,” you're the one who suffers.

Example: Angela didn't think peeking into a coworker's files was such a good idea—but her friend and colleague Carla egged her on until she did it. Angela let Carla's values take authority over her own.

2. The *fear of negative consequences* lame excuse

Do you stay silent because you fear retaliation?

Don't: underestimate how fear of retaliation affects you.

Why not? You might shut down so quickly you don't know it.

Do: conduct a cost-benefit analysis. Focus on long-term costs and benefits of speaking AND not speaking. Complete the Risky Conversation Assessment Form in the appendix and on my website at: www.speakstrong.com/articles/speak-strong/risky_conversation.html

Why? You'll never Speak Strong if you let retaliation control you.

Example: Roy resented how his wife spent money, but never said a word when she came home with shopping bags full of things they didn't need. He tried talking about it a few years back, and regretted it because his wife responded with the silent treatment.

On reflection, Roy realized it was not acceptable for him to be unable to discuss a subject that mattered so much to him.

3. The *fear of offending* lame excuse

Do you avoid issues because the truth might offend someone?

Don't: assume your desire not to offend is altruistic.

Why not? You may tiptoe around feelings to avoid your own discomfort with a sensitive topic. But if they need to know about something and you're not telling, what's so altruistic about that?

Do: ask — who really bears the burden from the unaddressed issue?

Why? Your “kindness” may be misplaced.

Example: Theresa didn't want to hurt Jay's feelings when he asked for feedback on his presentation, so she didn't point out the flaws. When Jay's presentation bombed, Theresa realized she should have spoken more honestly.

4. The *avoidance* lame excuse

Do you wait to speak up until a tomorrow that never comes?

Don't: kid yourself that the relief that comes from ignoring something is a form of resolution. Don't pretend you're waiting for better timing when you're really making an excuse to avoid the issue.

Why not? There's never a perfect time to talk. Waiting for one is a common lame excuse.

Do: require yourself to identify the reason why you're waiting. If the reason is a good one, commit to when you will speak.

Why? Sure, you may not want to break bad news to someone on their wedding day, but you can commit to when you will.

Example: Terry's wife was grumpy so he decided to wait to tell her he didn't want to go to her mother's for Christmas. The next day, her mood had improved. Terry was enjoying her company and didn't want to ruin her good mood. Eventually he realized there never was a good time, and he needed to go ahead and say it.

5. The *habit* lame excuse

Do you have a habit of not speaking up?

Don't: think you know what your habits are.

Why not? Habits are usually invisible.

Do: observe your trends.

Why? To find out what habits you need to change.

Example: It didn't even occur to Jessica to discuss finances with her fiancé before they married because she was not accustomed to addressing issues. After a rocky start to her marriage, she realized she and her husband could have avoided some of the conflict had she sought agreements instead of made assumptions.

6. The *no-one-else-is saying-anything* lame excuse

Do you assume if there was anything to say, someone else would say it?

Don't: count on other people to be more committed to truth than you are.

Why not? 1) History is full of examples of mass deception. Consensus doesn't make it right. 2) Others might be waiting for you to say something.

Do: ask why you trust others' ideas about what needs to be said over your own.

Why? You'll uncover a very passive pattern.

Example: Could she really be the only one that hated the new logo? No one else objected so Jolene stayed silent. She figured since no one else objected, everyone else must like it.

7. The *self-doubt* lame excuse

Do you let your own self-doubt silence you?

Don't: pretend you need certainty to speak.

Why not? If certainty was a prerequisite, no one would ever say anything.

Do: notice when you let doubt silence you.

Why? Doubt is a legitimate reason to educate yourself before you speak, but not a legitimate reason to silence yourself.

Example: Cybil didn't trust the applicant. Everyone else seemed charmed by what she saw as slickness. She didn't express her concerns to the hiring committee because she questioned her own perceptions.

8. The *don't know what to say* lame excuse

Do you stay silent because you don't have the words?

Don't: accept poor communication skills as a legitimate excuse for silence.

Why not? You can learn.

Do: assess your lack of skills, develop skills, and practice, practice, practice.

Why? It will enhance your life.

Example: Seven years into her marriage, Amy still hasn't told her mother-in-law that her put-downs are hurtful. Her mother-in-law has a way of twisting Amy's words that Amy doesn't know how to respond to. Amy stayed silent because she didn't know what to say. That might have been understandable for a few months, but seven years later, it's a lame excuse. She should have learned long ago, and it's time for her to start now.

Shameful excuse

9. Ask if you stay silent out of self-interest

Do you stay silent when something needs to be said because ignoring the issue works for you?

Don't: ignore your own deceitfulness.

Why not? Your complicity implicates you.

Do: be honest with yourself about your motivation.

Why? Your integrity is worth more than anything you gain from hiding the truth.

Example: Jeremy's partner Margot told their boss the report was late because the consultant didn't get back to them on time. It wasn't true, but Jeremy didn't correct her. After all, her lie vindicated him as well as her.

So many excuses — so much to gain by naming them.

Do you have an excuse-based life? You can't Speak Strong and make excuses at the same time. Name your lame excuses so you'll know where to start when you're ready to lose them. That's coming up in skill #7. We have groundwork to lay first.

“ Sometimes
silence is golden.
Other times
it's criminal. ”

MERYL RUNION

Do as I say, AND as I do

Skill #22: Match your talk and your walk

Now you tell me

Labor is no time to discover that the designated midwife’s talk doesn’t match her walk—but that’s when *Gone With the Wind*’s Scarlet O’Hara discovered that her housemaid, Prissy, fabricated her claims to midwifery competence. It would have been nice to have known the truth earlier, before Scarlet decided to rely on Prissy in that crucial moment.

And it would have been nice for me to have known *before* the book was released that the man I hired for Public Relations was too disorganized to manage my book launch. It would have been nice for Ken to have known *before* he married her that Kathy’s wealth was an illusion funded by \$75,000 of debt. It would have been nice for many adjustable rate mortgage customers to have known *before* they signed on the dotted line that their mortgage broker couldn’t anticipate pending rate hikes either.

It’s called congruence

People form impressions and expectations based on your words. When you talk a good game and walk a poor one, you lose credibility.

If there’s a gap between your talk and your walk—if you lack congruence—people will learn you don’t mean what you say. Who would believe a thing Prissy said after the labor fiasco?

If you say it like you mean it, people are more likely to believe what you say. However, no amount of powerful wording and body language will undo the damage that comes from not matching your walk to your talk. To paraphrase Stephen Covey, you can’t talk your way out of something you walked your way into.

She walks her talk

My “Official Blog Evaluator,” Cindy, promised me an email by Monday afternoon. When I hadn’t heard from her by Tuesday, I knew something was wrong. I later learned she had injured her back and was laid up in bed.

On the other end of the spectrum, there’s Hank. If he says he’ll call and he actually does, I’m surprised.

You can sweet talk for a while, but ultimately, people determine the power of your words based on the congruence between your words and actions.

Oversell can get you a short-term advantage, but consider the long-term cost. Protect the power of your words and match your talk and your walk.

“*People don't care
about what you're
going to TRY to do.
They want to know
what you ARE
going to do.*”

MERYL RUNION

Dos, Don'ts and Tips, Skill # 22:

Match your talk and your walk

A perfect match

You can talk a promise in a few seconds. You can walk for days, weeks and even months and still not catch up with your talk.

You can walk your way into disgrace in a few seconds. You can talk for days, weeks and even months and still not exonerate your walk.

Talk matters. Walk matters. Talk indicates walk. Walk validates talk. Put them together and you have powerful communication.

That is: you have powerful communication if your talk and your walk match. Here are some tips to help you match your walk and your talk.

1. If you can't walk it, don't talk it

Don't: indicate you are something you're not or that you will do something you're not sure you can.

Why not? If you don't deliver on expectations your words create, your words lose their power.

Do: refrain from saying anything that might create false impressions or expectations for your listener.

Why? To make your walk match your talk.

Example: Mike is the perennial optimist. He expects things to go easily. He used to commit based on his optimistic expectations. That changed when his over-commitment led him to keep his daughter waiting at daycare for an hour after it closed. He developed the new habit of waiting to make commitments until he could be certain he could deliver. It took him a while, because Mike likes to say yes. But he found it works much better to promise realistically.

2. If you wouldn't want to talk it, don't walk it

Don't: do anything you wouldn't want to fess up to.

Why not? Unspeakable walk encourages deceptive talk.

Do: make sure you'd be willing to openly discuss what you're considering doing before you do it.

Why? It will elevate your behavior and your word power.

Example: Clara wanted to stay longer at the sale, but decided not to. She didn't want to explain why she was late to her boss, and she was unwilling to make up an excuse.

3. Take responsibility for the ways people interpret your words

Don't: ignore possible unintended implications and interpretations.

Why not? Just because you know what you mean doesn't mean they do.

Do: ask yourself, "What expectations do my words create?"

Why? If those expectations don't match what actually happens, people will feel let down, whether those expectations are the ones you intended or not.

Example: Marla thinks aloud. She suggests get-togethers, talks about how she can help people, and floats ideas in the spirit of brainstorming. She discovered that other people take her words more literally than she intends. That sets them up for disappointment and undermines her credibility.

4. Examine misunderstandings for talk that didn't match the walk

Don't: blame others when they misinterpret your words.

Why not? It's your job to be clear.

Do: ask yourself—and them— "Did I create false expectations by something I said?"

Why? So you can speak more precisely in the future.

Example: Emily was upset when Ralph did not get the web edits to her by start of business as he suggested he would. Ralph was irritated because it wasn't his job to do the web edits anyway, and he thought it was unreasonable for Emily to expect him to get to it so quickly. On reconsideration, he decided she did have the right to expect prompt delivery for the simple reason that he had implied he would have them by start of business. He decided to be more careful about his promises.

5. Acknowledge discrepancies

Don't: ignore or dismiss un-walked talk.

Why not? 1) If you do, people will conclude you don't mean what you say.

2) If you do, you will continue to under-deliver on your talk.

Do: verbalize the (presumably occasional) gap between your words and your actions.

Why? 1) If you acknowledge where your walk falls short of your talk, others would be more likely to trust your words in the future, and 2) It will make you more likely to speak accurately in the future.

Example: Ralph apologized to Emily for not delivering as promised.

PowerPhrase/What to Say: I committed to getting your edits to you and didn't follow-up. I apologize.

Poison Phrase/What NOT to say: I may have promised to get them to you, but it wasn't my job anyway.

6. Warn your listener if you're thinking aloud or when your words are tentative

Don't: assume your listener knows when you're thinking aloud.

Why not? Not everyone thinks aloud, and even those who do don't know when you are.

Do: tell your listener if your words are tentative.

Why? So they won't form expectations based on words you never intended as commitments.

Example: When Kurt asked Debbie for help, she started talking about how it might be possible for her to do what he asked. She paused to let Kurt know she was thinking aloud to see if she could make it work, and she wasn't committing yet.

PowerPhrase/What to Say: I'm thinking aloud here about whether and how we can make it work.

7. Under-promise and over-deliver

Don't: make promises you can't keep.

Why not? Your promises will lose their power.

Do: be conservative about what you commit to.

Why? People will know that you mean what you say and they can count on you.

Example: Joy thought she could make a 3:00 meeting, but scheduled it for 3:15 because she was more certain that she could make it on time.

PowerPhrase/What to Say: I might be able to make it by 3:00, but to be sure I don't keep you waiting for me let's set it for 3:15.

Protect the power

Big talk can be cheap and seductive, but when the walk doesn't match the talk, your words lose their power.

Shortcuts can be easy and seductive, but when your walk contradicts your talk, your words lose their power.

If you can't walk it, don't talk it. If you wouldn't want to talk it, don't walk it. That's how you protect the power of your words.

“Noble words
fall flat
without
corresponding
action.”

MERYL RUNION