



What to do when your Conversational Invisibility Shield fails...

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Based on extracts and experiences drawn from our
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Ever envied those who seem to effortlessly connect with others in conversations, get people's attention, get noticed and get heard? *"Why wasn't I born a silver-tongued orator with the gift of the gab? It's just not fair"*, you think to yourself. They come across so poised, so collected, so... *conversationally confident*.

Meanwhile, on the other silent side of the table, there you are: dry-mouthed, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible – heart-pumping, cringing in creeping anxiety at the possibility you may have to speak-up, hoping your conversational invisibility shield will hold out just a little bit longer, at least until the end of the meeting...

When Conversations Create Anxiety....

We all have a natural need to be heard – to have our ideas listened-to, our feelings acknowledged and our views understood. Yet while we all *want* to have a say in conversations, not all of us plunge fearlessly into them. For a good many of us, conversations can be a pretty scary, anxiety-provoking proposition. In my conversational coaching clinics, I regularly come across a good few who have a deep-set reluctance, even a deep-seated fear, of speaking up. Here's how one person described it to me in a recent clinic....

"When it comes to speaking up in meetings, or with more than one other person for that matter, my mind goes blank, my mouth dries-up, I trip over my own tongue, and I end-up sounding like the proverbial *'village idiot'*. Then I feel even more stupid. I tell myself I know less than, or feel inferior to, everyone else in the room, and I convince myself they can see all this plainly written all over my face."

Conversational confidence, or rather the lack of it, is a big hold-back for an astoundingly large proportion of the population. Whether it's shyness, self-doubt, fear of saying the wrong thing and making a fool of themselves, or feeling awkward or out of their depth, many people zip their lips and say as little as possible. They've learned to shy-away and retreat from conversations – not just at work, but often socially too. They:

- Dread being called on to give their view, strike-up a conversation, or even make idle chit-chat
- Become passive and immobilised, which further drains their conversational confidence
- Convince themselves they haven't got anything valuable to say that would be of interest to others

- ❑ Talk themselves out of talking-up with self-talk that shuts them up and closes them down
- ❑ Spend so much time in silence, avoiding speaking-up, that they don't get the conversational practice in, that could improve their confidence

I only came across this syndrome recently: "*glossophobia*". It's conversational anxiety: a fear of speaking-up in front of others. Like all good terms, it's Greek, and it transliterates as 'tongue-fear'. Yep, there are real symptoms too, that have been identified. They include:

- ❑ Intense anxiety about the prospect of having to speak-up in front of any group
- ❑ Avoiding situations where I think the group's attention may end-up getting focused on me
- ❑ Freezing in front of people, getting tongue-twisted, stammering and minds going blank
- ❑ Physical distress signals like mouth goes dry, sweating, body tremors and voice goes weak or shaky
- ❑ Classic panic-attack markers – racing heart, feeling alarmed, even nausea, stomach-pain or 'the runs'.

Who hasn't had times like this? So imagine the more severe variety of what we may commonly call 'nerves'. In fact, 'glossophobia' is apparently much more common than I thought: as many as 75% of us may suffer from speaking, or in a more general form, social anxiety. That's an epidemic? It can happen in workplaces when a leader freaks-out about making a presentation to senior management. It can come up in classrooms, where a student prays their teacher doesn't ask them to answer a question. It can strike before you go into a job interview, or even at home when you have to give an informal speech at a family get-together.



When freezing can mean failure...

Lack of conversational confidence can leave us frozen with fear. Worse for the longer term, it can also mean we miss out on many career opportunities, social connections, self-expressions, and learning possibilities. If you're one of many who finds it hard to say your piece, working on ways to say what you need to say, and get into conversations, is a pretty pressing need because conversational reluctance can:

- ❑ Hold you back from relating to others as well as you could, and sustaining those relationships
- ❑ Be a factor in not winning jobs, being selected for projects or being passed over for promotions
- ❑ Stop you contributing to team discussions, asserting yourself and expressing ideas and opinions
- ❑ Make you feel ignored, under-valued, alienated, or that your opinions or ideas fall on 'deaf ears'
- ❑ Mean we obsess over feeling alienated or excluded. This makes us think we don't belong in our team or workplace, and resentments fester until we feel like we'll implode under the strain.
- ❑ Lead others to misinterpret the motives behind our silence not as shyness, but as being distant, disinterested, sulky, snobbish, submissive, or mentally not with it, when we're none of these

It can be devastating to go through life with people constantly making assumptions or judgments about you, when you're simply silent because you're conversationally anxious. Ironically, it's often a fear of judgments like these that are partly the reason why you're frightened to speak-up in the first place. But probably the largest liability is that lack of conversational confidence connects to low self-esteem. It detracts from our self-belief. This affects our self-image – the way we see ourselves, how we relate to others, how positively assertive or influential we are, what we believe we're capable of doing or not, and how we handle different kinds of situations in our lives.

When our self-talk talks us out of talking...

Conversational anxiety is linked to the way you think. Those of us less prone to speak up, have been training our brains for years to talk ourselves out of talking up. So 'simply' changing the way we think can help reduce conversational reluctance. Of course, this isn't really 'simple' for any of us.



We give a lot of power to our thoughts and, if we're not mindful, they can control us in ways that are not very helpful. For example, first comes a fearful thought about the dire consequences of speaking-up. We then quickly follow up with a self-justification story that further supports our silence. That's two tiers of self-doubt just to start with – that seem very real to us, otherwise they wouldn't be so convincing!

Being afraid is what leads to a lack of conversational confidence. What sorts of concerns go through your mind? Do you feel you lack knowledge of what's being discussed? Are you over-awed by those powerful, persuasive advocates? Do you shoot yourself in the foot (or should that be – tongue?) with negative self-talk? Do you tell yourself you can't find the right words to express what you have to say, or think no-one would be interested in it anyway?

As with so many things, it's what's in your head that makes you feel uncomfortable first, and holds you back from talking. Limiting beliefs undermine your conversational confidence most – how we allow our negative self-talk to take over and make us feel unsafe, uncomfortable, inadequate (*or all three at once*). We sit there squirming over agonizing thoughts like: *"No-one wants to hear my ideas about this", "I don't agree but saying so would make me look foolish" or "I have no idea what to say."* Meanwhile, you imagine all the eloquent wordsmiths round the table are glaring at you disapprovingly. You feel foolish, worthless, shy and more awkward than ever.

Limiting beliefs drain your already-receding confidence, holding you back from engaging in conversations and other social interactions, and setting off a chain of confidence-draining thoughts. Your anxiety triggers fire, your emotions go into self-protect mode, and you shut-down. This chain reaction is at the core of a lack of conversational confidence. By now, your thinking's become so automatic, you're probably not even aware of these thoughts. But we bet they're there. Here's five steps you can take to lessen conversational anxiety and eliminate your fear of speaking-up.

1. List your main concerns about speaking up. Think of a recent anxiety-provoking conversation, then, identify your confidence-draining beliefs. For example: *"I'm afraid of speaking up because (eg. I'll sound stupid...incompetent...wrong-headed [add your own word!]!"* Don't stop with one. List as many as you can. Don't try changing them to a positive straight-off. Just make yourself alert to them.

2. Think about the impact negative self-talk has on you. How does it make you feel and act? This stops your self-talk operating on automatic pilot, saying and doing what it wants. You're now aware of these thoughts, and what they do to you. Root-out negative self-talk whenever you can. For a start, simply say to yourself: *"That's negative, stop it"*.

3. Contest your negative self-talk – don't just accept it. For example: how are you exaggerating this? Is this always true, just sometimes and not others, or is it a vicious fiction you flagellate yourself with? Can you think where various pieces of self-talk came from? Childhood's the first place to look. Then ask: do I still want this to be the case in my adult-life?

4. Don't misinterpret others looks or actions. Question the assumptions you make about what you think others think of you. Did you misinterpret comments or facial expressions that convince you others think negatively of you (eg *"She thinks what I'm saying is rubbish"*)? Did you personalise by seeing someone's

gestures or words as a slur on you (eg *"He looks irritated or bored with what I said"*)? What evidence is there really, that others notice your anxiety or think the worst of you? Most likely, they're not thinking anything like that at all. Tell yourself: *"I'm making this up!"*

5. Neutralise negative self-talks by replacing them with more helpful ones. These are more balanced, positive, affirming, or even just more rational ones (eg *"People are interested in my views on this and want to know what they are..."*) Or, think cost-and-consequences of not speaking-up (eg *"How will not speaking up hinder the situation or me?"*)

When behaviours become self-defeating...

Self-defeating behaviour is an extension of our self-talk. It's the habitual actions we end up doing over and over again as a result of repeating certain patterns of thoughts and feelings. All of us have some self-defeating behaviours of some sort. For example, maybe we give up without really trying (to avoid failure or demonstrate how we always fail). Or maybe you have a tendency to denigrate what you say in conversations (eg *"This probably isn't all that important, but I was thinking..."*). These habitual actions – just like the self-talk that prompts them – are mainly unconscious. Most of us who lack a bit of conversational confidence, work against ourselves without even noticing it.



Do you have self-defeating behaviours that reinforce your lack of conversation confidence? For instance, during conversations, you may behave in ways that focus too much on deferring to other's viewpoints, or being too polite, keeping the peace, ducking out of discussions, agreeing when you really don't, or holding back when you should say something. Behaviours like this amplify anxiety and erode your sense of self-worth. They reinforce your negative self-talk that no one cares what you have to say or that your ideas aren't good enough.

Self-defeating behaviour creates negatively-reinforcing feedback loops. For example, if you think you have poor conversational skills, you're less likely to make the effort to strike up discussions or contribute to them. To handle conversations better, don't submit to self-sabotage. You need to identify your self-defeating behaviours and replace them with more useful and constructive ones. Practising replacement behaviours boosts your self-belief and courage, as you clear away many of the things that drain conversational confidence. Once you start to rid and replace such self-defeating conversational behaviours, you also help your self-esteem and confidence in other areas of your life too.

When you don't speak-up...



Sometimes we're so tied up with why we think we can't speak-up, that we become addicted to being quiet, as if we've sworn a vow of silence. Here are some really good reasons to break your vow. Many these have to do with what others take your silence to mean:

- Silence can be seen as assent.** You think it keeps you safe from conflict and detached in a neutral kind of way from the issue. But it can be quite the opposite. If you don't say anything, it may be taken as tacit approval (or disapproval).
- Silence can be construed as superiority.** This is the opposite of what's going on for you. Yet some will assume your silence means you won't deign to give your opinion. They certainly won't assume you don't have one (they're probably right). So holding back leaves others wondering where you stand.

- ❑ **Silence may mean information gets missed.** You assume someone will raise the points you wanted to. Trouble is they may not, and your commitment to silence means you won't say anything either. Your piece of the puzzle may be important. Without it, things may get missed.
- ❑ **Silence may lead to mistakes.** Workplaces are full of instances where not speaking-up has resulted in costly mistakes or far worse. Sometimes not speaking your mind, for fear of offending or coming into conflict with someone, may mean people take the wrong course of action, and may suffer for it too.
- ❑ **Silence works against consensus.** It's really hard to reach consensus on a course of action when some are silent and non-committal about what they think or what options they prefer. Your silence may be a barrier to making decisions – and voicing your preference may help others to share theirs.
- ❑ **Silence may be seen as indifference.** Do you want to be seen as non-committal? That's another assumption many make about silence. Whether it's fair or not, voicing your opinion is taken to mean by others that you care.

When 'listen-and-question' can count...

Many people think if you want to build conversational confidence, you need to work on the speaking end: be more influential, or assertive about what to say and how to say it. If you've got the conversational pluck to start speaking up and saying what's on your mind straightaway, go for it. Many people on the silent sidelines though, might like a softer approach to warm up to doing this. So another way to start is to listen, ask questions and be interested in what others think and feel.



Many of us think a good conversation depends on what you say. It equally depends on how well you listen and respond to what others say.

Two core personal practices to lift conversational confidence are listening and questioning. This is good news for low-talkers. Speaking up, even if it's to ask a question, clarify what someone else just said, or agree with it, shows you're involved in the conversation. You don't have to come up with a world-beating idea, or be the cleverest word-crafter on the block. You can get a lot of conversational mileage out of listening too. It keeps you in the conversation and many people will be glad you asked. For low-talkers, asking questions offers a sometimes easier way into the conversation than having to say something straight off yourself.

➔ **Our 1-day work-out on *Building Conversational Confidence*** is one of the successors to our earlier Conversational Coaching Clinic. It covers practical tools and techniques to raise your conversational confidence; speak with more clarity and influence; and generally have better, more satisfying interactions – at work and elsewhere.

More on *Building Conversational Confidence* and our other conversational coaching programs: *Dealing with Difficult Discussions, Positive Performance Conversations, Leading through Conversations* on-line.

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