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## **ARTICLE** **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

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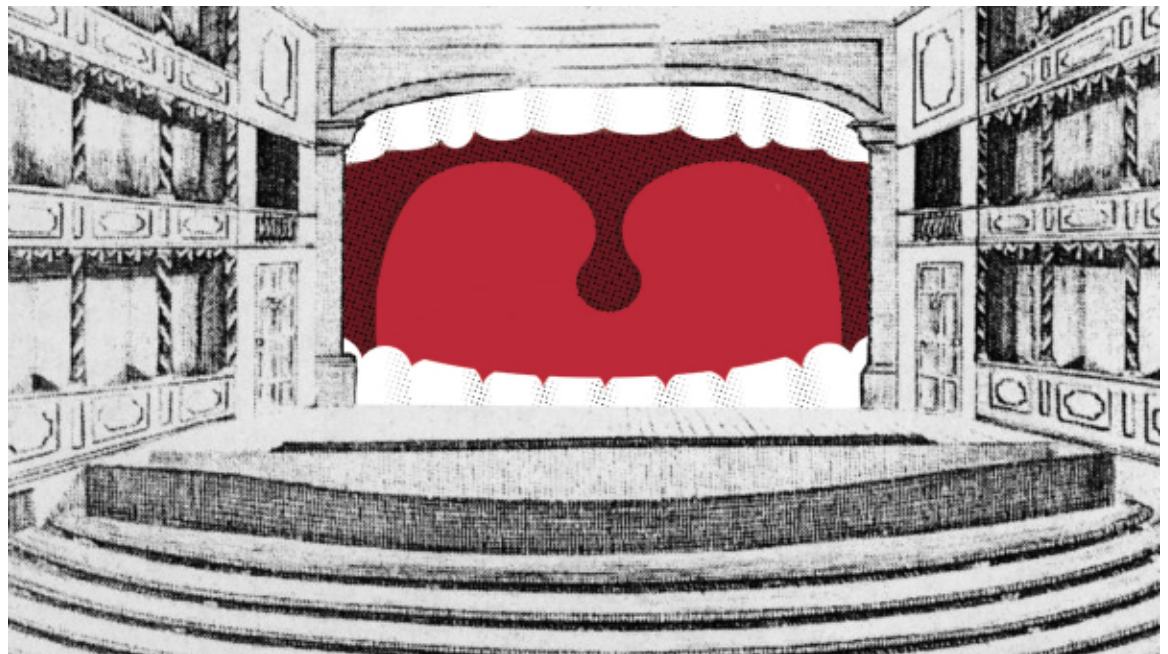
*by Rebecca Shambaugh*

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

# To Sound Like a Leader, Think About What You Say, and How and When You Say It

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STEVEN MOORE FOR HBR

Nancy started her day feeling prepared to brief her executive team on a high-stakes project she had been working on for the past two months. She had rehearsed her slide deck repeatedly, to the point where she had every level of content practically memorized. She arrived at the meeting early and waited patiently, yet anxiously, for her part of the agenda. The meeting began, and within a few

minutes Jack, one of the cochairs, asked her to brief the executives on her project and recommendations.

Nancy enthusiastically launched into her presentation, hitting every talking point that she had meticulously rehearsed. With a solid command of the material, she felt at the top of her game and was relieved that she'd spent so much time practicing and preparing for this meeting. But just as she was about to move into her recommendations, Jack interrupted and said, "Nancy, I appreciate your hard work on this project, but it is not relevant to our agenda, and it doesn't have merit for the business objectives we're covering today." Mortified, Nancy retreated to her chair and sat in silence for the rest of the meeting. She couldn't wait to bolt from the room the moment the meeting ended to reflect on how this moment — which she expected would be a positive turning point in her career — had turned into a disaster.

What just happened here? While Nancy was prepared to participate in the meeting, she failed to think strategically. This is a common problem that trips up many capable managers, executives, and leaders when it comes to determining their role in communications, meetings, and other forums. Learning how to develop and convey a more strategic executive voice — in part by understanding context — can help leaders avoid finding themselves, as Nancy did, in a potentially career-damaging situation.

### **Why You Need an Executive Voice**

Whether you are an associate manager or a senior executive, what you say, how you say it, when you say it, to whom you say it, and whether you say it in the proper context are critical components for tapping into your full strategic leadership potential. If you want to establish credibility and influence people, particularly when interacting with other executives or senior leadership, it's important to be concise and let individuals know clearly what role you want them to play in the conversation. It's also important to demystify the content of any message you deliver by avoiding jargon and being a person of few — but effective — words.

All of these factors relate to developing a strategic executive voice. Your executive voice is less about your performance; it relates more to your strategic instincts, understanding of context, and awareness of the signals you send in your daily interactions and communications. Like its sister attribute, executive presence, executive voice can seem somewhat intangible and thus difficult to define. But the fact is, we all have a preferred way to communicate with others, and doing this with strategic intent and a solid grasp of context can mean the difference between success and failure in your communication and leadership style.

One of the most important aspects of having an executive voice relates to being a strategic leader. I frequently hear from top executives that they would like to promote one of their high-potential leaders but feel the person is **not strategic enough** to advance. When I hear managers say this, I try to gently push back and suggest that maybe the problem isn't the candidate's lack of strategic leadership potential; perhaps they are failing to tap into their abilities as a strategic leader.

Whether you have someone on your team who you think lacks strategic readiness or you're worried that *you* might be a leader with untapped strategic potential due to an undeveloped executive voice, read on. Below are some coaching strategies that I use frequently with both male and female executives to help them add a more strategic executive voice to their leadership tool kit.

**Understand the context.** How often do you find yourself throwing out an unformed idea in a meeting, not speaking up when people are looking for your ideas, or saying something that doesn't quite fit the agenda and suddenly getting that "deer in the headlights" feeling? If these situations sound familiar, what is it that went wrong? In short, these types of tactical errors come down to failing to understand the context of the call, meeting, or discussion that you are in.

For example, if you are the primary authority on a topic, then it's likely that the context would require you to lead the meeting and make any final decisions. But if you are one of several executives who might have input, then sharing your view and connecting the dots with others (rather than stealing the spotlight with your great ideas) would be your role. If you are in learning mode and are not asked to present at a meeting, then your role when it comes to communication would be to observe and listen. Knowing or finding out in advance what your expected role is in a group forum or event can guide you in determining the kind of voice you need for that particular venue and can help ensure that you understand the context before you speak up.

**Be a visionary.** Sometimes we fail to tap into an executive voice because we focus too much on our own function or role. Strategic leaders are more visionary than that, taking an enterprise view that focuses less on themselves and more on the wider organization. Another part of being visionary is developing the ability to articulate aspirations for the future and a rationale for transformation.

This type of executive vision helps guide decisions around individual and corporate action. You should work toward connecting the dots with your recommendations to show how your decisions affect others around the table, including your staff and the organization as a whole.

**Cultivate strategic relationships.** One of the best ways to build your strategic thinking is by leveraging relationships more intentionally, with specific business goals in mind. This calls for having senior leaders and executives who bring a strategic perspective of the organization's goals, changes, and top priorities that we may normally not have access to. When you cultivate and invest in broad strategic relationships, it helps you avoid getting caught up in day-to-day minutiae.

It's easy to lose sight of the significance of cultivating new and diverse relationships when you already have a full plate — but part of being able to access a strong executive voice is expanding your knowledge beyond your specific position, department, or area of expertise.

To develop your executive voice, take time to reach out to at least one person each week outside of your immediate team or functional area. Try to learn:

- how they fit into the business as a whole
- their goals and challenges
- ways you might support them as a strategic business partner

**Bring solutions, not just problems.** While coaching a wide range of executives, I've seen firsthand that most feel frustrated when people point out challenges but don't offer any resolutions. Leading strategically with a strong executive voice involves problem solving, not just finger-pointing at difficult issues.

You can show up more strategically by doing your homework and taking the lead in analyzing situations. Brainstorm fresh ideas that go beyond the obvious. Even if you don't have the perfect answer, you can demonstrate your ability to come up with clever solutions.

**Stay calm in the pressure cooker.** People with an effective executive voice aren't easily rattled. Can you provide levelheaded leadership even when — in fact, particularly when — everyone around you is losing their composure? When you can stick with facts instead of getting swept into an emotional tailspin no matter how stressed you feel, you'll be able to lead with a more powerful executive voice.

It can be uncomfortable to recognize and admit personal challenges regarding your executive voice, and at first you may get pushback when making suggestions to improve the executive voice of those on your team. But once you overcome this initial resistance, whether in yourself or others, you'll find it's worth the up-front effort to investigate how to contribute most effectively to important meetings and other communications. By making the necessary adjustments to your approach to participation, you can avoid flying blind and start showing up more strategically in every setting.

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