

FIND YOUR VOICE AT WORK



**Be Seen. Be Heard.
Be Valued for Being You.**

Sharon Watoli
www.sharonnatoli.com

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BACKGROUND

Sharon Natoli

From the moment we're born, we're trained to fit in.

We're told to use our manners, share, play nicely and wait our turn to speak.

Schools send home disciplinary notes if we don't follow the rules. Workplaces set out procedures, develop standards and provide job descriptions creating routines all to make sure we meet their expectations.

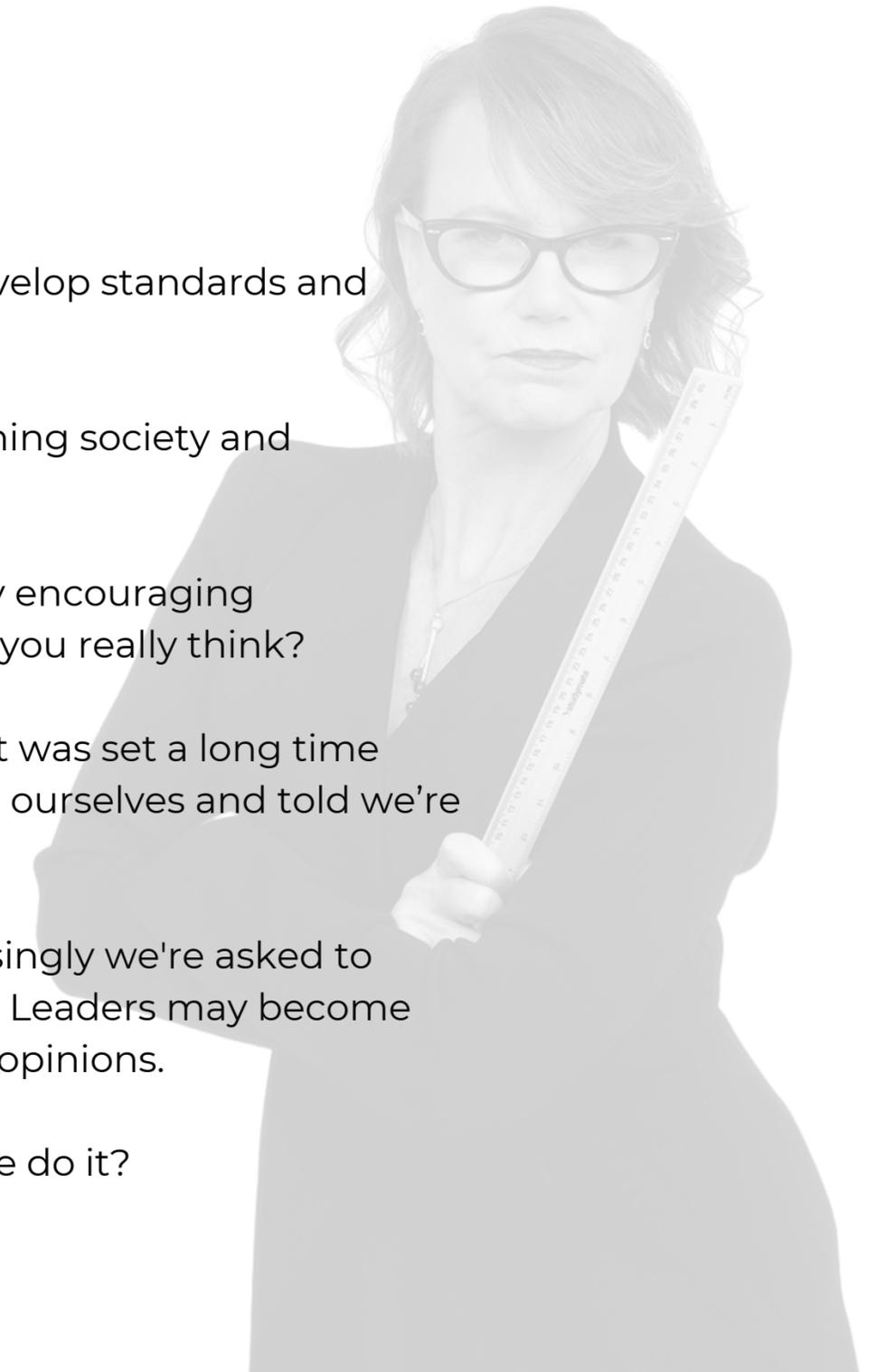
For the most part, this training is useful. It promotes a more predictable, safe, polite and well functioning society and organised, efficient workplaces.

However it can also create a gap. A gap between what you really think, and what you actually say. By encouraging compliance over self-connection, when do you learn to listen to yourself, trust yourself, and say what you really think?

Seth Godin in his book *The Practise* (1), spells out the challenge. He says our lives follow a pattern that was set a long time ago. It's a pattern that values compliance and convenience over being real. We're trained not to trust ourselves and told we're not entitled to speak up.

Ironically, workplaces are starting to value the very qualities that have been trained out of us. Increasingly we're asked to bring more of our authentic self to work, to speak up, to ideate, to innovate, to create and contribute. Leaders may become frustrated when we don't step up, when we hold back and hesitate to share our thoughts, ideas and opinions.

We know what is being asked of us - to share our ideas, say what we think - but why don't, or can't we do it?



FOUR SCENARIOS YOU FACE

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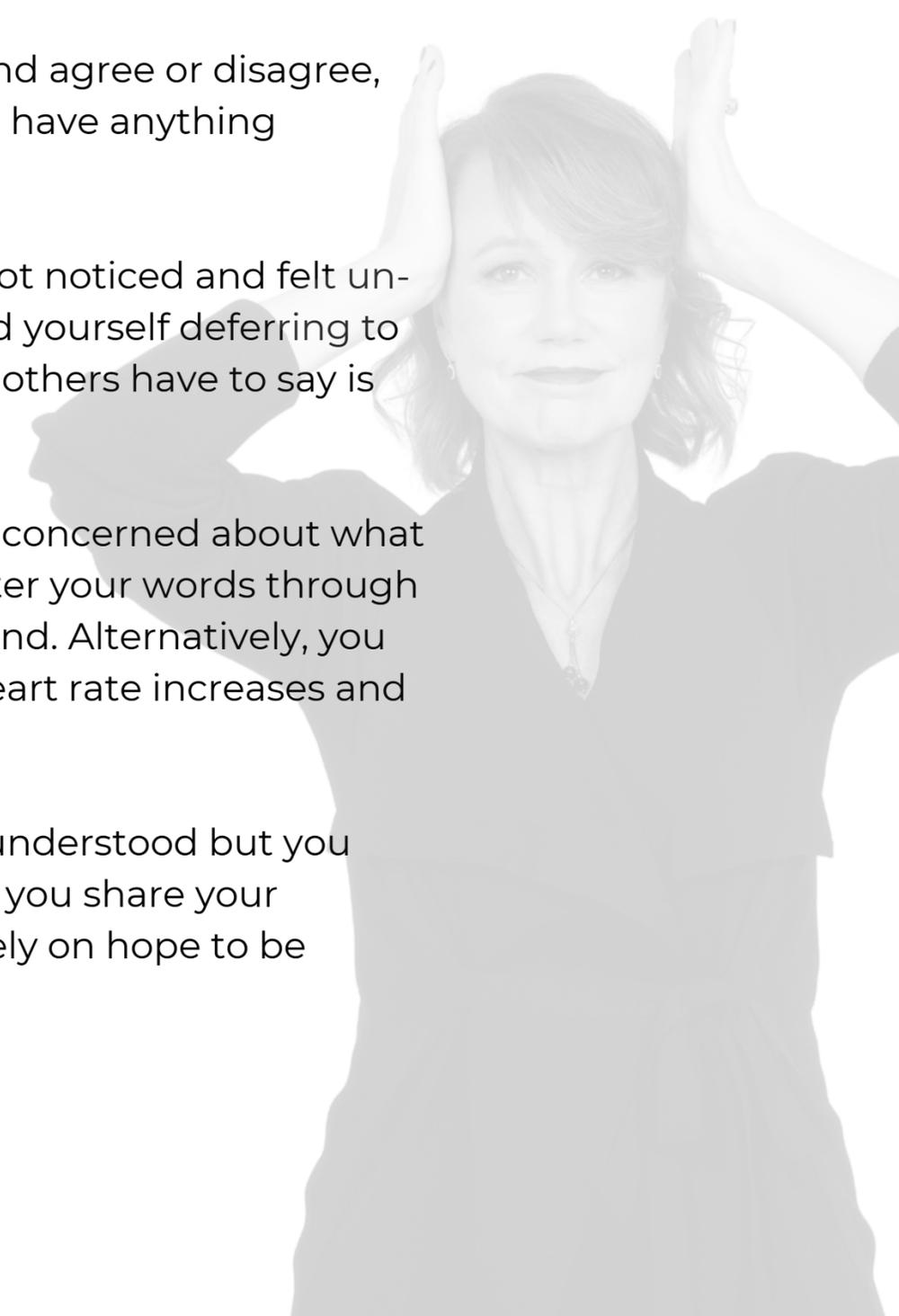
The following explains the four possible scenarios you face. Can you relate?

1. HIDING: You don't know what to say – you're interested in the conversation at hand, you nod along and agree or disagree, but when it comes to contributing, you draw a blank. Nothing comes up – you genuinely don't feel you have anything original to contribute.

2. HESITATING: You don't feel what you have to say will make a difference – you've been overlooked, not noticed and felt unacknowledged too many times. This pattern has created a narrative: your voice doesn't matter. You find yourself deferring to others to have their say and make the decisions. You feel your voice isn't that important and that what others have to say is more valuable.

3. HOLDING BACK: You know what you want to say but you're afraid to share it. You hold back. You're concerned about what others will think, whether what you have to say is good enough, right enough or smart enough. You filter your words through a people-pleasing voice, saying what you think others want to hear, rather than what's truly on your mind. Alternatively, you choose to avoid the discomfort of the spotlight by simply holding back. Your hands get sweaty, your heart rate increases and you're too nervous to speak up – you don't have the courage to push yourself forward.

4. HOPING: You know what you want to say, you speak up but your words don't land. You hope to be understood but you find yourself either speaking too aggressively, too fast or too quietly, without power or influence. While you share your thoughts, you find your words are not effective. Overtime, you lose the confidence to contribute and rely on hope to be understood.



THE BIG CHALLENGES

Sharon Natoli

If you can relate to these scenarios, you're not alone. Research by Gallup (2) found 70% of people don't feel their opinion counts at work. Another survey of 1300 people found holding back from speaking up is a trigger for unhealthy workplace behaviours that cripple constructive dialogue and drive people apart. It found when people don't express their opinion:

- 65% stay silent but feel inauthentic
- 47% avoid people
- 42% silently fume and stew
- 39% ruminate about all the things they'd say if they had the courage
- 19% fake agreement and 14% severe relationships

All of this can create significant discomfort and negatively impact your performance.

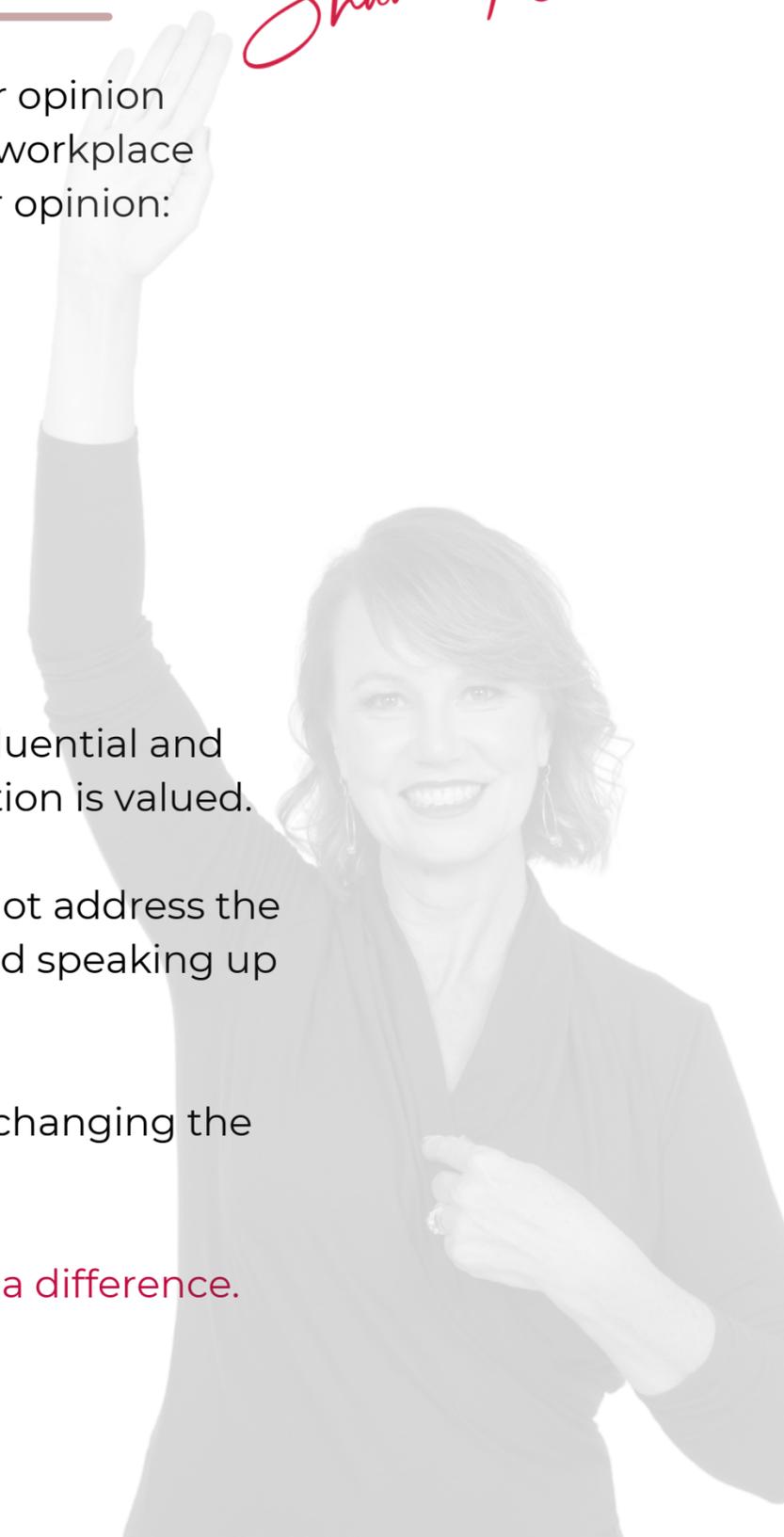
Conversely, the ability to speak up at work signals your leadership readiness. You're seen as more proactive, influential and gain more respect. You reduce the mental stress associated with keeping things to yourself and your contribution is valued.

One of the challenges however is that a safe workplace environment, and being told your voice matters, may not address the real issues that hold you back from speaking up. That's because research shows when it comes to deeply rooted speaking up behaviours, educational interventions have limited effectiveness (3).

Mona Weiss, Assistant Professor of Management and Diversity at the Free University of Berlin, has shown that changing the workplace environment overlooks the one key factor needed to create real change and that is agency (3).

Agency means believing you have the power to influence, your words matter and what you have to say makes a difference.

Building agency, self belief and personal power is key for effectively and efficiently finding your voice.



CREATING CHANGE

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When the workplace environment is supportive and your perception of yourself as an agent for change evolves, you have the optimal recipe to grow your power to speak up consistently and to maintain this over the long term.

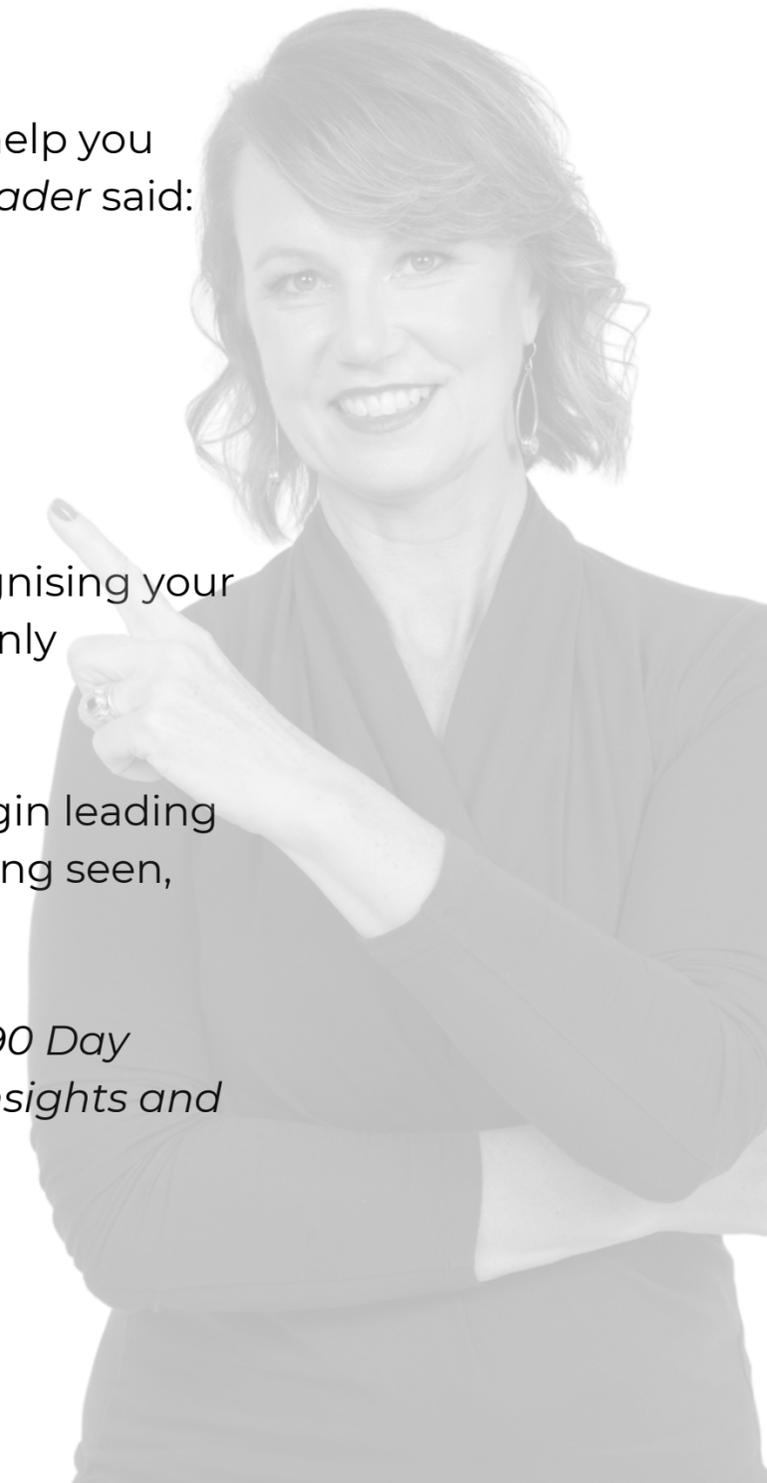
It's against this background that in this paper I describe 10 common internal barriers and associated solutions to help you speak up with greater agency – a sense that what you have to say matters. As Arthur Joseph, author of *Voice of Leader* said:

"When you own your voice, you own your power".

Owning your voice takes more than courage, positive affirmations or telling yourself to "just do it!" It's about recognising your ability to be an agent for change. It's about growing your power, presence and confidence. This is the key to not only speaking up, but continuing to do so again and again and again.

I trust this paper will provide useful thoughts to assist you enhance your capacity to speak up and by doing so, begin leading yourself toward the future you want to create, making the workplace contribution you would like to make and being seen, heard and valued for your authentic self.

If you'd like further support on your journey, you'll find details of the Find Your Voice - Speak Up with Confidence 90 Day Coaching Program on page 19. And if you'd like to stay in touch, consider joining my tribe to receive fortnightly insights and inspiration on finding your voice. Sign up by visiting my website www.sharonnatoli.com/blog.



Barrier 1: I believe what I have to say won't make a difference.

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When you feel your voice won't make a difference, apathy can kick in. Why bother trying to contribute? You may be demotivated to want to say anything at all.

As an unhelpful internal belief, a sense of indifference can be triggered when the problem at hand seems so overwhelming that you feel helpless and powerless to affect change. It can also arise when you don't care enough about the challenge or situation to feel compelled enough to contribute.

Solution 1: Take action to demonstrate to yourself you make a difference.

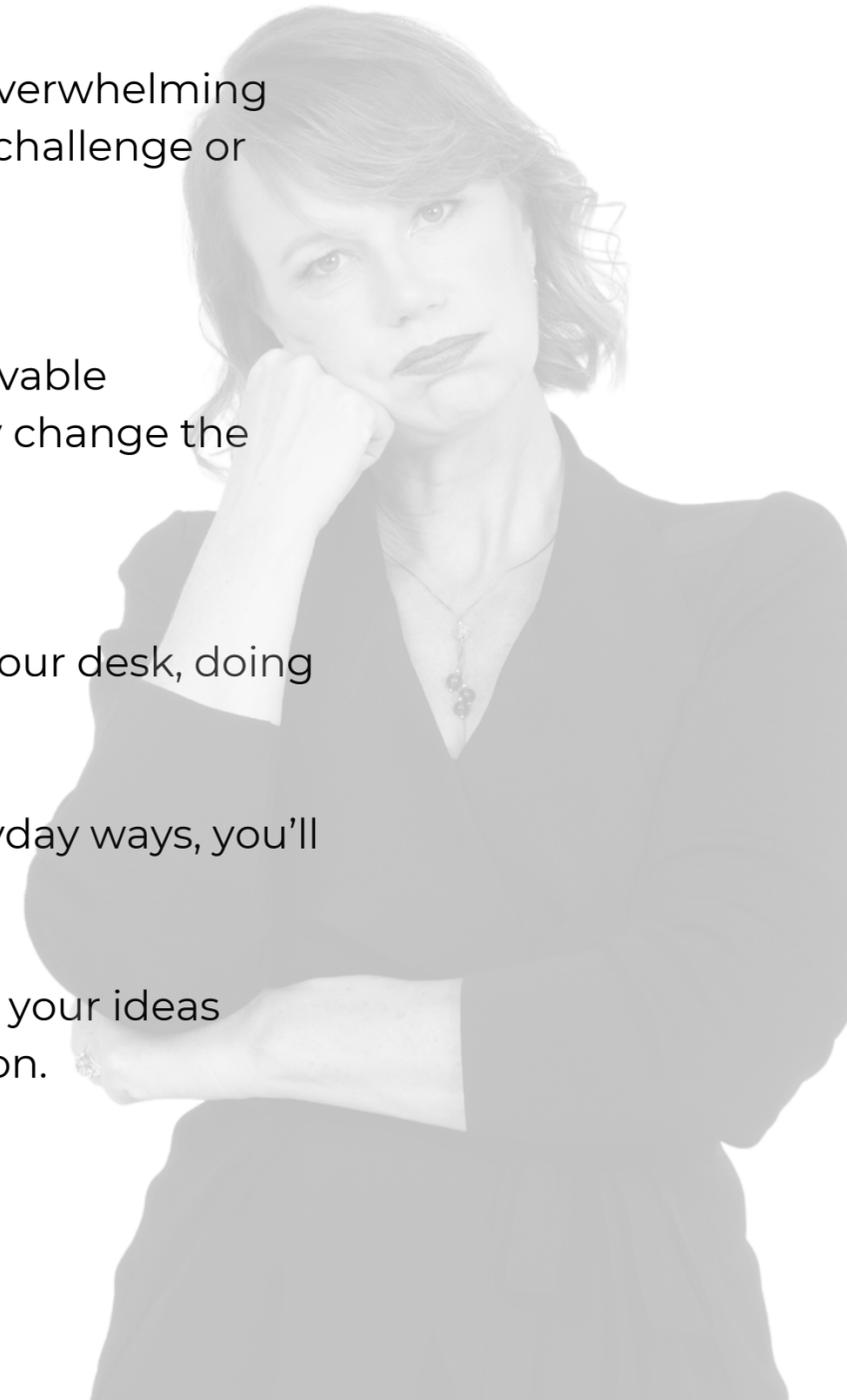
Challenge your sense of indifference by acting as if you do make a difference. Trying out new, but small, achievable behaviours that challenge your current identity is one way to break down this belief. This in turn will gradually change the way you perceive yourself over time.

Here's an idea:

Develop a daily promise to yourself to do something that makes a difference. It could be as simple as tidying your desk, doing a small favour, calling someone or making a note of people's birthdays and sending a card or text.

When you adopt practices that demonstrate to yourself that you are a person who makes a difference in everyday ways, you'll begin to also see yourself as someone who's voice makes a difference.

By challenging unhelpful beliefs, you will gradually influence your own willingness to speak up and contribute your ideas over time. Working from the inside out puts you in the drivers seat, making you the agent of your own evolution.



Barrier 2: I worry about what others will think.

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According to Arthur Joseph, author of *The Sound of the Soul* (4), your voice is the representation and manifestation of who you are. That's one reason why, when you go to speak, you can worry about what others will think. Opening your mouth to speak means you're literally opening yourself up and exposing yourself to the world.

This can feel uncomfortable because as humans we have a strong desire to belong. The fear of being criticised, or rejected when we speak triggers the nervous system, in turn sending stress signals out to the body. Your heart rate increases, your palms get sweaty, your breathing rate increases and the muscles in your jaw and face tighten. Your activated vagus nerve affects your larynx and vocal cords and your voice sounds unnatural and stressed out. All these feelings of 'nervousness' that arise from worrying about what others think can hold you back, or make you sound less effective than you would like.

Solution 2: Practise calmness

Adopt daily lifestyle habits that assist you to cultivate calmness and self connection. When you can maintain a greater sense of presence and connection to yourself, it becomes easier to say what you want to say, with less concern about what others think.

Here's an idea:

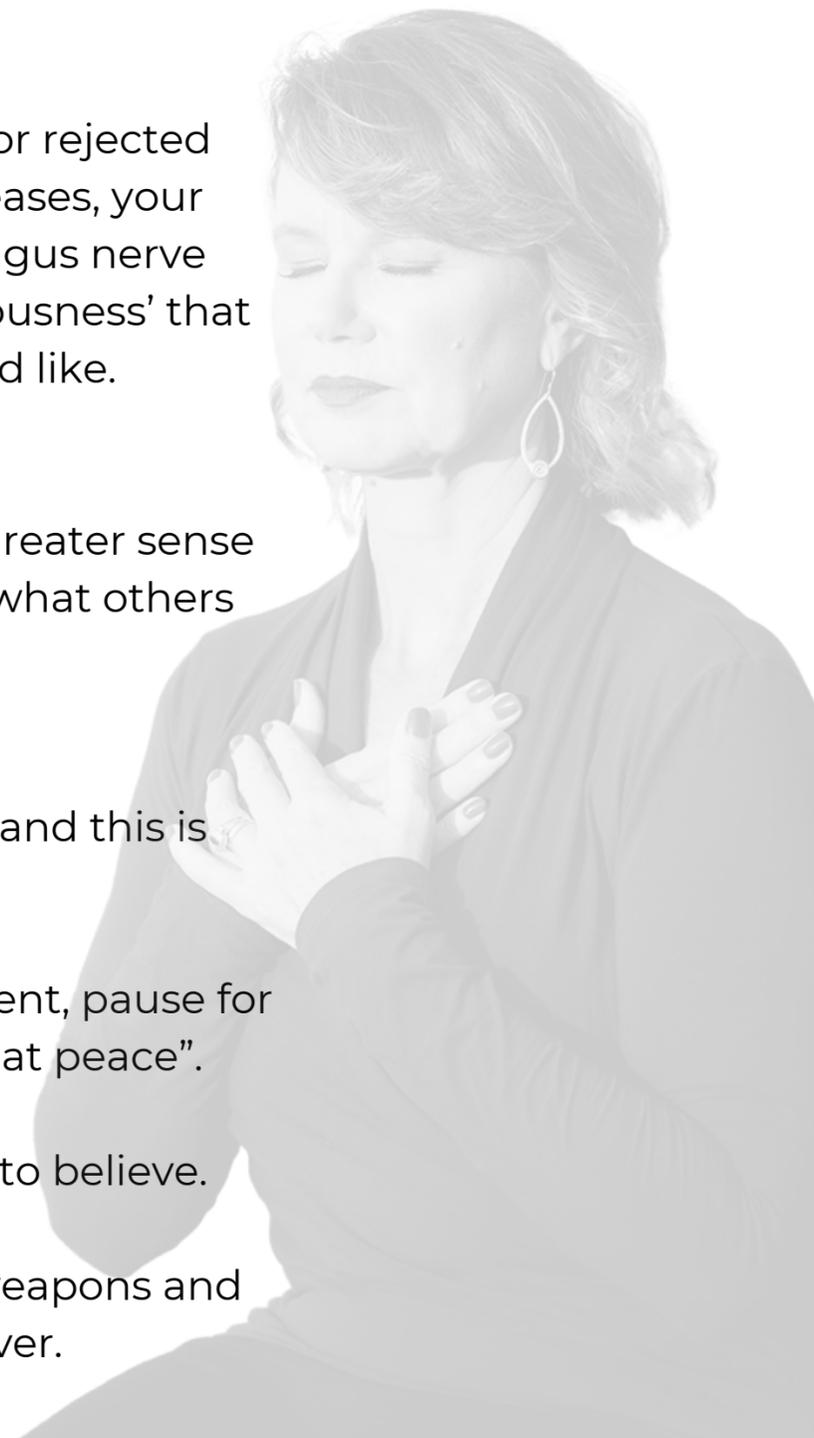
In her book *How to do the Work*, Dr Nicole LePera (5) suggests an activity for maintaining calmness at anytime, and this is useful to practise at regular intervals throughout the day, including before you speak. It goes like this:

When you find yourself worrying about what others think, or before you go into a conversation, discussion or event, pause for a moment. Put your hand on your heart, close your eyes, take a deep breath and say to yourself "I am safe. I am at peace".

The words "I am safe" are a useful reminder that you may not have as much to fear as what your fear wants you to believe.

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The words "I am at peace" are a useful reminder that you are not in a fight. You can surrender, put down your weapons and be present. This can be helpful as a way to focus on the conversation at hand and the message you want to deliver.



Barrier 3: I believe what I have to say is not as valuable as others.

Sharon Natoli

When you believe what you have to say won't be as valuable as someone else's contribution and you let them go first, you've out-sourced your power. You have told yourself an unhelpful story and given away your agency. Not only have you judged yourself however, you've also judged the other person and their contribution before it has come out of their mouth. The voice of your inner judge has been busy sorting, separating and evaluating yours and other people's contributions against some sort of standard it has established in your mind.

This is exhausting. It suffocates productivity and effectiveness, and separates you from your authentic voice.

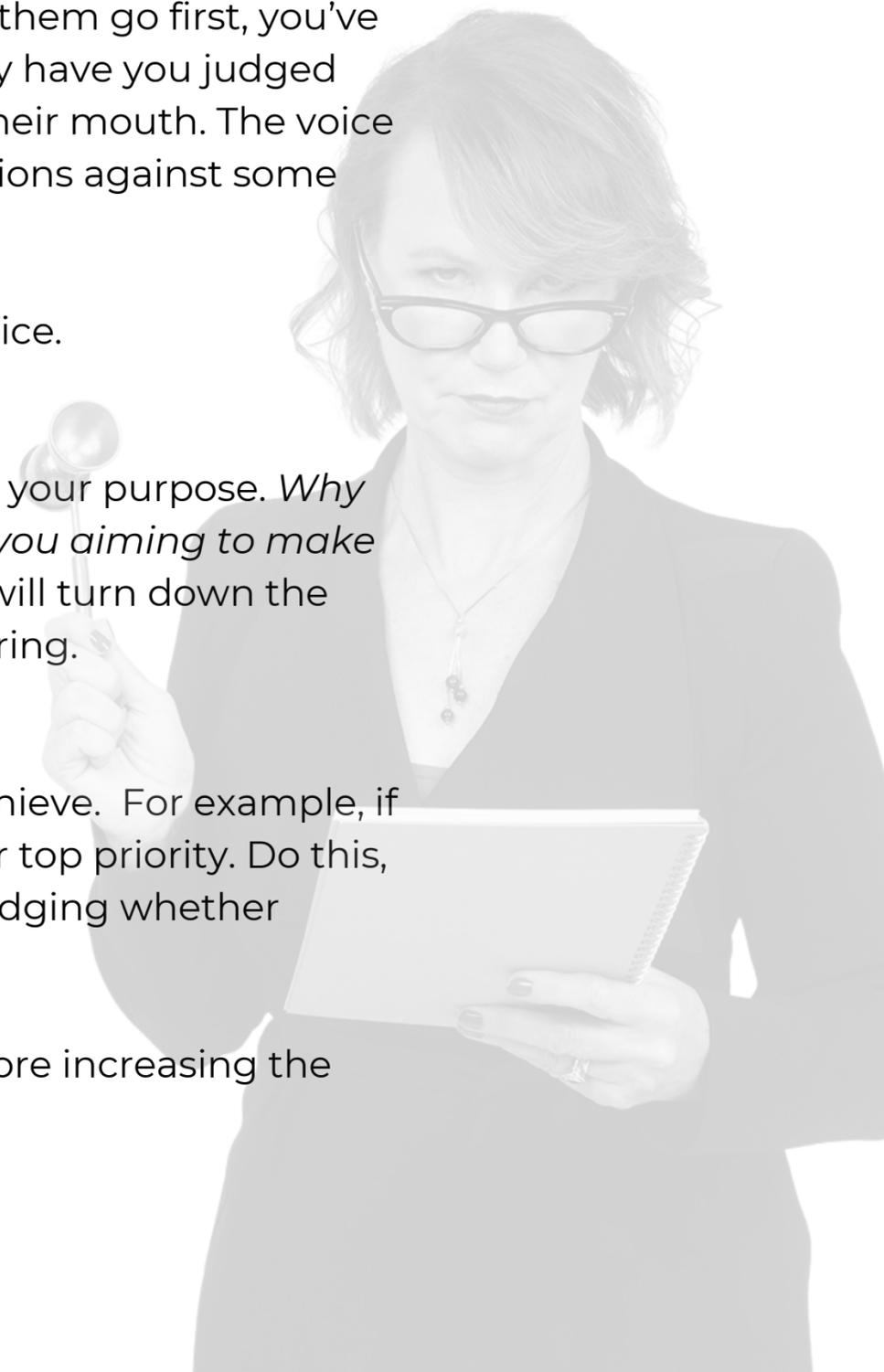
Solution 3: connect to your purpose.

Notice when you are judging your contribution (and that of others), and train yourself to stay focused on your purpose. *Why are you in this meeting? What is it that you want to contribute to this conversation? What change are you aiming to make in your role?* Focusing on a higher purpose and orientating yourself toward making a contribution, you will turn down the volume of the inner dialogue that keeps you stuck in your head, mired in sorting, evaluating and comparing.

Here's an idea:

Before going into a meeting or conversation pause to consider the context of what you are aiming to achieve. For example, if the meeting is about establishing a strategy for a new project, keep the project outcome in mind as your top priority. Do this, rather than worrying about how your roles and responsibilities for the project compare with others, or judging whether someone is doing more, or less, than somebody else.

Stay focused on the higher purpose and you will find it easier to contribute to the common good, therefore increasing the value of your presence at the meeting.



Barrier 4: I'm not confident enough.

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Confidence is the feeling you have when you know you can count on yourself to say what needs to be said in the moments that matter. This in turn is related to self-trust – the idea that you can rely on yourself to show up for yourself – not just once, but regularly, over time. It's just like trusting someone else. When you can trust yourself, your confidence to speak up grows.

If you've been trained to follow the rules, do as you're told and turn to others for advice, guidance and direction, it can be challenging to trust yourself, and easy to question your thoughts and ideas. As a result, you may feel a sense of uncertainty on the inside and this can hold you back from speaking up.

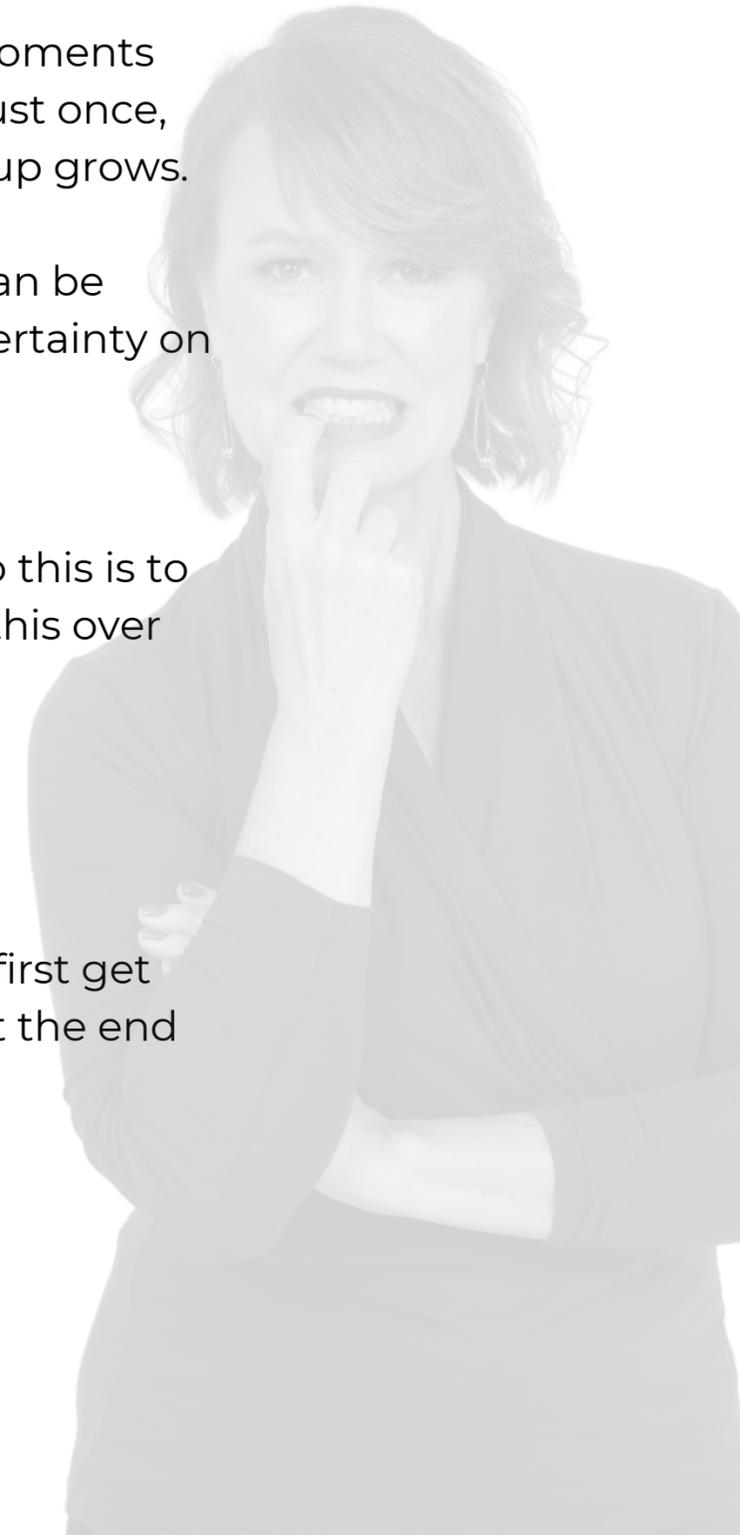
Solution 4: build self-trust

To build self-trust and a strong foundation from which to speak, it's important to turn up for yourself. One way to do this is to do what you say. By keeping the promises you make to yourself you will begin to rely on yourself and by repeating this over time, you will build self-trust. With it, you will enhance your confidence to speak up.

Here's an idea:

Start by keeping the promises you make to yourself. Commit to a small daily activity or habit that you do regularly.

Start small so the confidence you can rely on yourself builds. For example, do 1 minute of slow breathing when you first get up in the morning, or drink a glass of water before breakfast everyday, or write down one thing you're grateful for at the end of the day. Picking something you find easy is critical to building the belief in yourself as someone you can rely on.



Barrier 5: I don't want to rock the boat.

Sharon Natoli

It's common to feel uncomfortable around conflict. However, if you don't speak up to avoid outer conflict in the short term, you create inner turmoil in the long term.

According to Chandler and Gryzb in their book *The Nice Factor* (6), every time you smooth things over, do anything to keep the peace and avoid conflict, you are creating a storehouse of anger and resentment that will eventually burst open. This is one reason why holding back what it is you want to say can be so personally debilitating.

From another perspective, comfort and avoidance is where the status quo lives. Not rocking the boat means the boat remains still and you, and potentially those around you, remain stuck.

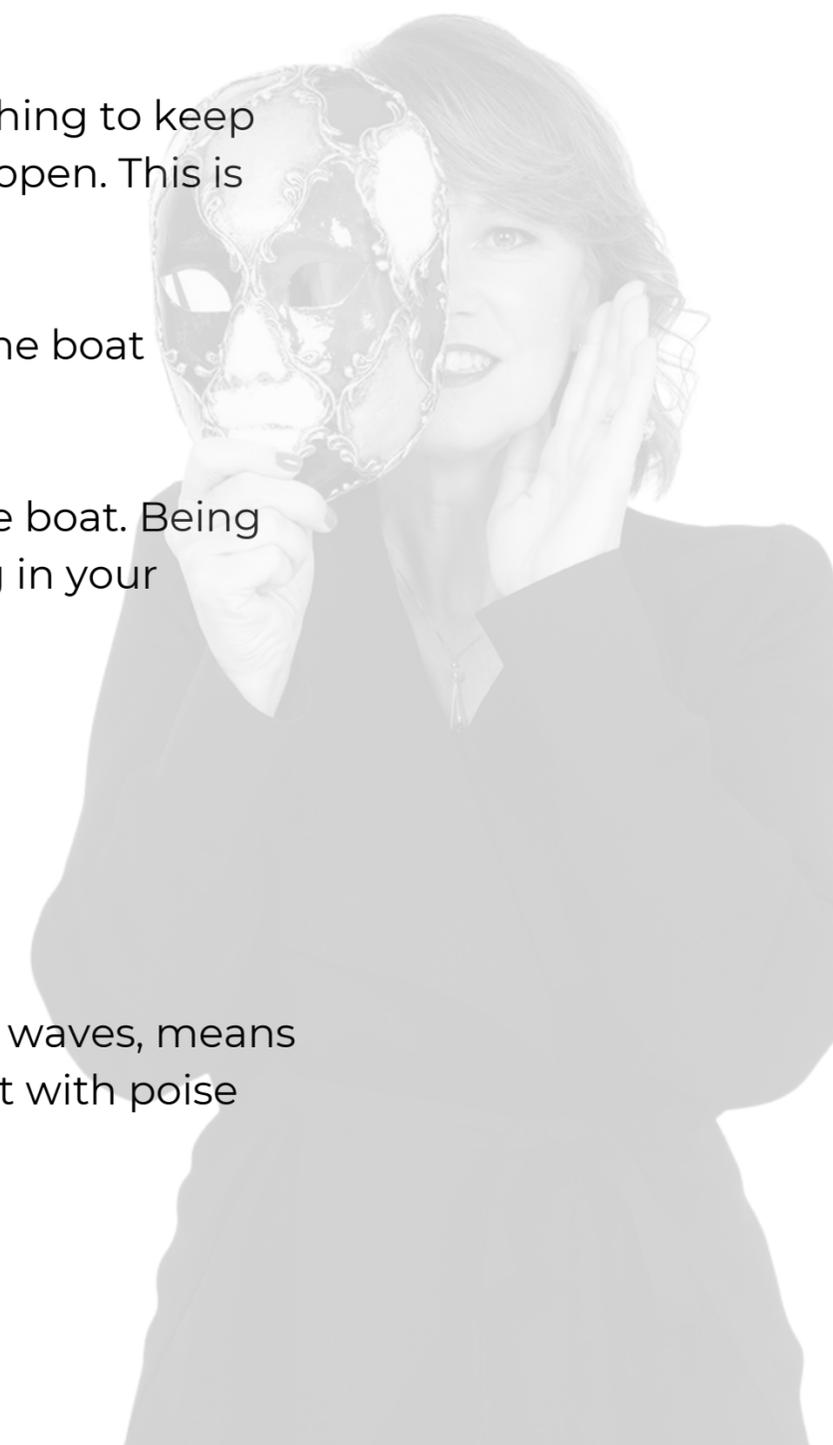
To create influence and lead change it is important to get comfortable with the possibility that you will rock the boat. Being able to withstand the energy of the waves is an important attribute that will help you to speak up, stand strong in your conviction and make the contribution you genuinely want to make.

"A ship in harbour is safe but that's not what ships were built for".

John A Shedd

Solution 5: become waterproof

Speaking up with the knowledge that not everyone will agree with you, and standing up to the crashing of the waves, means getting comfortable with discomfort. If you do receive feedback and criticism, you are better placed to accept it with poise and grace and to keep on swimming!



EVERYDAY DARING - BUILDING THE HABIT OF SELF BELIEF

Sharon Natoli

Here's an idea:

Practise doing things that put you into manageable discomfort.

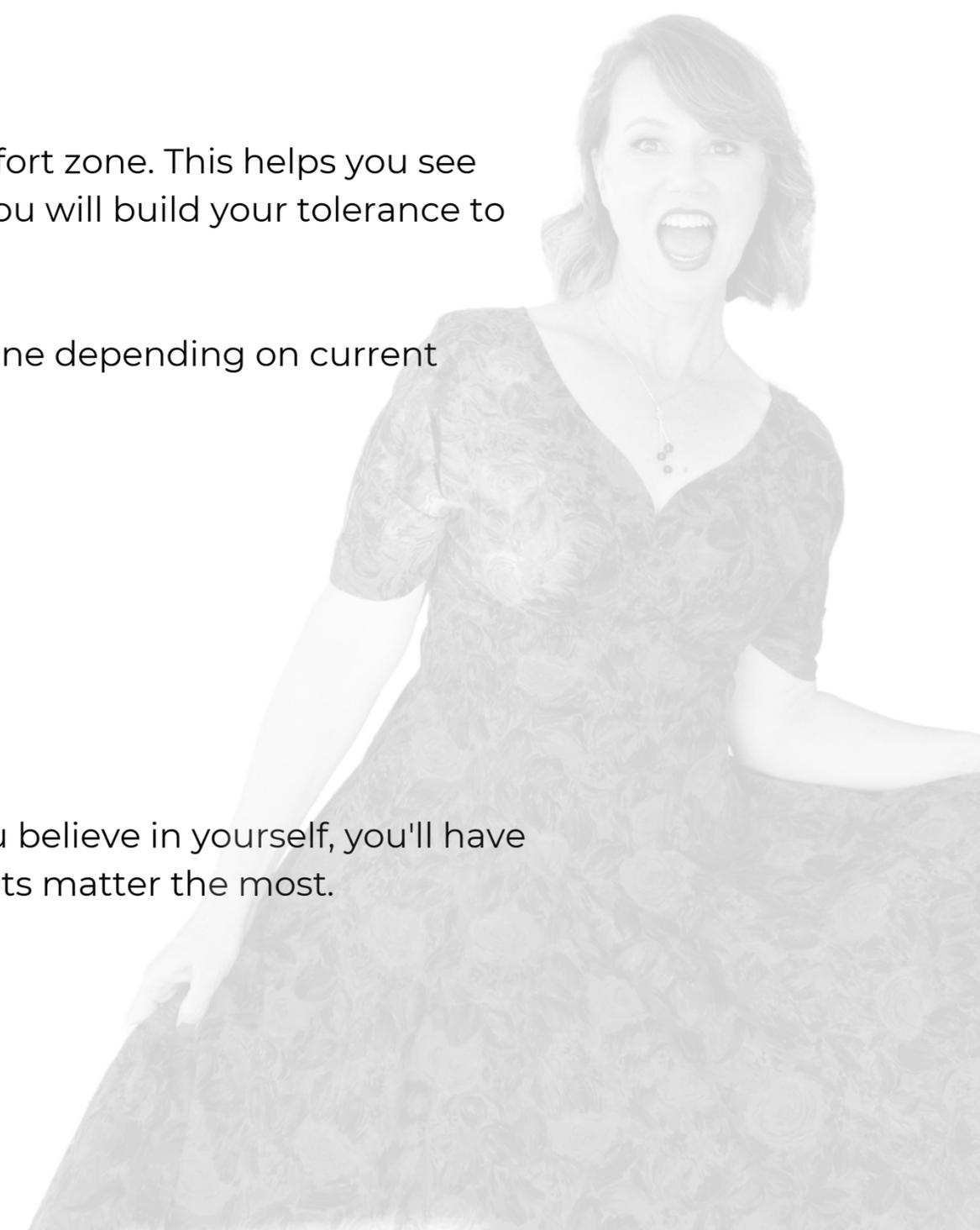
I call this practise **Everyday Daring** – consciously doing things that stretch you out of your comfort zone. This helps you see you have a greater capacity to do hard things and are stronger than you think. By doing this, you will build your tolerance to speak up despite the possibility of rocking the boat and gradually, your self-belief will grow.

Small, everyday dares are activities you choose that stretch you. This will be personal for everyone depending on current tolerance levels.

Some ideas include:

- If black features in your wardrobe, have a day where you wear no black at all
- Instead of walking into the office quietly, walk in humming or singing
- Wave to a stranger
- Walk backwards in the park
- Make a call you have been putting off.

Everyday daring builds the habit of courage which in turn enhances your self-belief. When you believe in yourself, you'll have a greater capacity to speak up in the moment and say what you want to say when the moments matter the most.



Barrier 6: I'm not a good listener. I hold back because I might have missed something.

Sharon Natoli

It's easy for your mind to wander in meetings and in conversations. In fact, according to research by Harvard University, people spend an average of 47% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing (7). The chance this is happening is higher if your mind is distracted by formulating your words before you speak.

You may find yourself worrying about what others are thinking or saying, making judgements about the situation, the environment or the people present, or even find your mind wandering as you consider what you'll have for dinner that night. All of this inner noise means it's easy to miss something, and as a result, doubt your contribution in case you didn't hear an important part of the conversation.

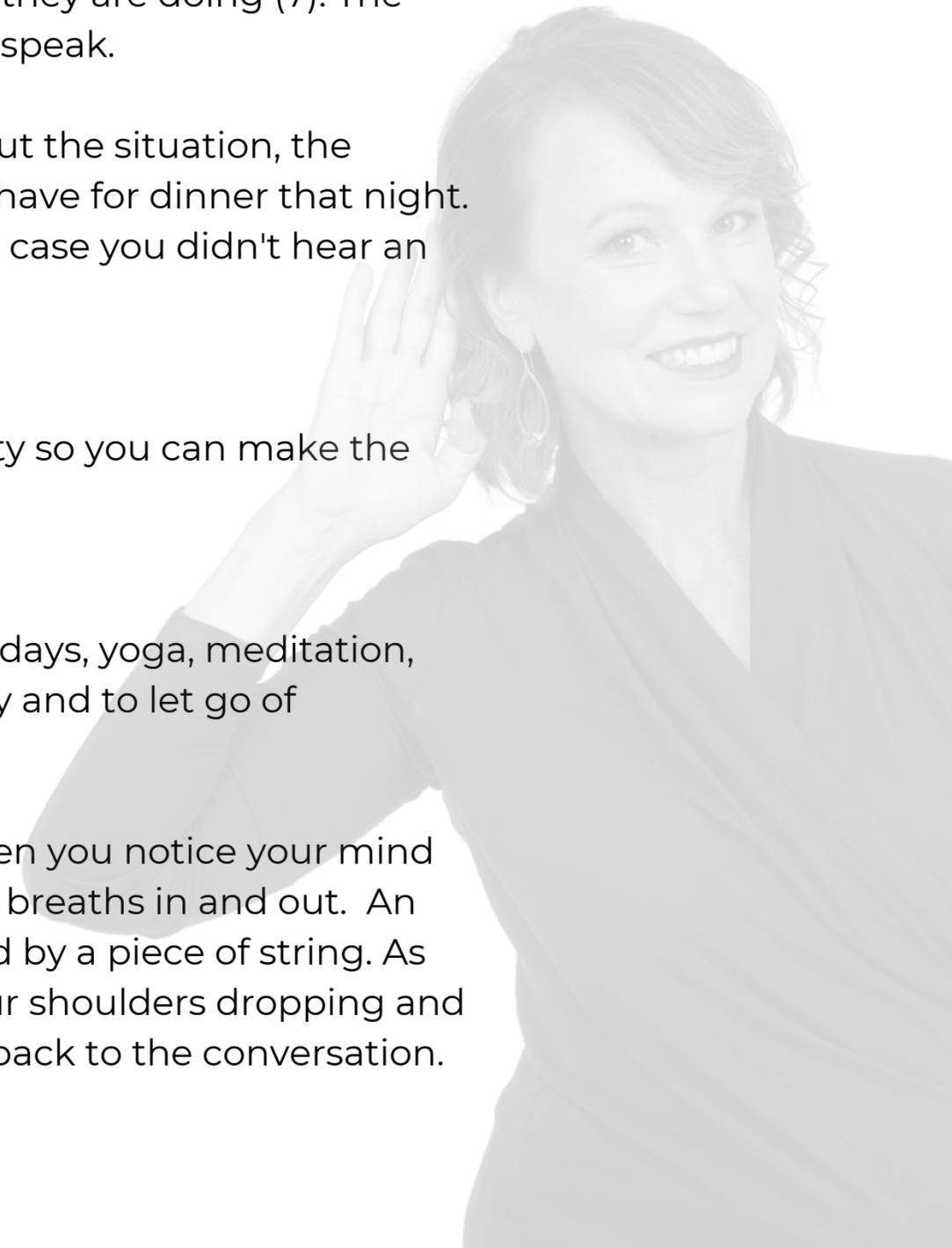
Solution 6: Practise Presence

Practising ways to keep your mind present will help maintain your focus and increase your certainty so you can make the contribution you would like to make.

Here's an idea:

Consider adopting regular mindfulness practises into your routine. Examples include digital detox days, yoga, meditation, gratitude, journaling and mindful eating. These activities help train your brain to focus more deeply and to let go of distractions.

Along with regular mindfulness practices, quick and easy ideas you can turn to in the moment when you notice your mind wandering are also valuable. For example, connecting with your breath by taking a few deep belly breaths in and out. An approach I find particularly useful is imagining you're being pulled up through the top of your head by a piece of string. As you breathe in, lift yourself up, then imagine letting the string go and breathe out. You'll notice your shoulders dropping and an immediate sense of relaxation. From that more relaxed state, you can then turn your attention back to the conversation.



Barrier 7: I don't like being wrong - I hold back until I know I'm right.

Sharon Natoli

Being right is a strategy your sub-conscious uses to protect you from being exposed. If you're right, you reduce the risk of being criticised and are more likely to avoid the discomfort that might come with any feedback or opposing viewpoints.

The issue, however, is that being "right" comes from a fixed perspective and leaves little room for others to contribute or for ideas to be built on and developed further.

Being "right" is characteristic of what Stanford University psychologist Dr Carol Dweck calls a 'fixed mindset'. This is where you believe your qualities are carved in stone and you seek to prove yourself over and over. This mindset contrasts with a growth mindset where you believe that you, and your ideas, can change and grow through application and experience.

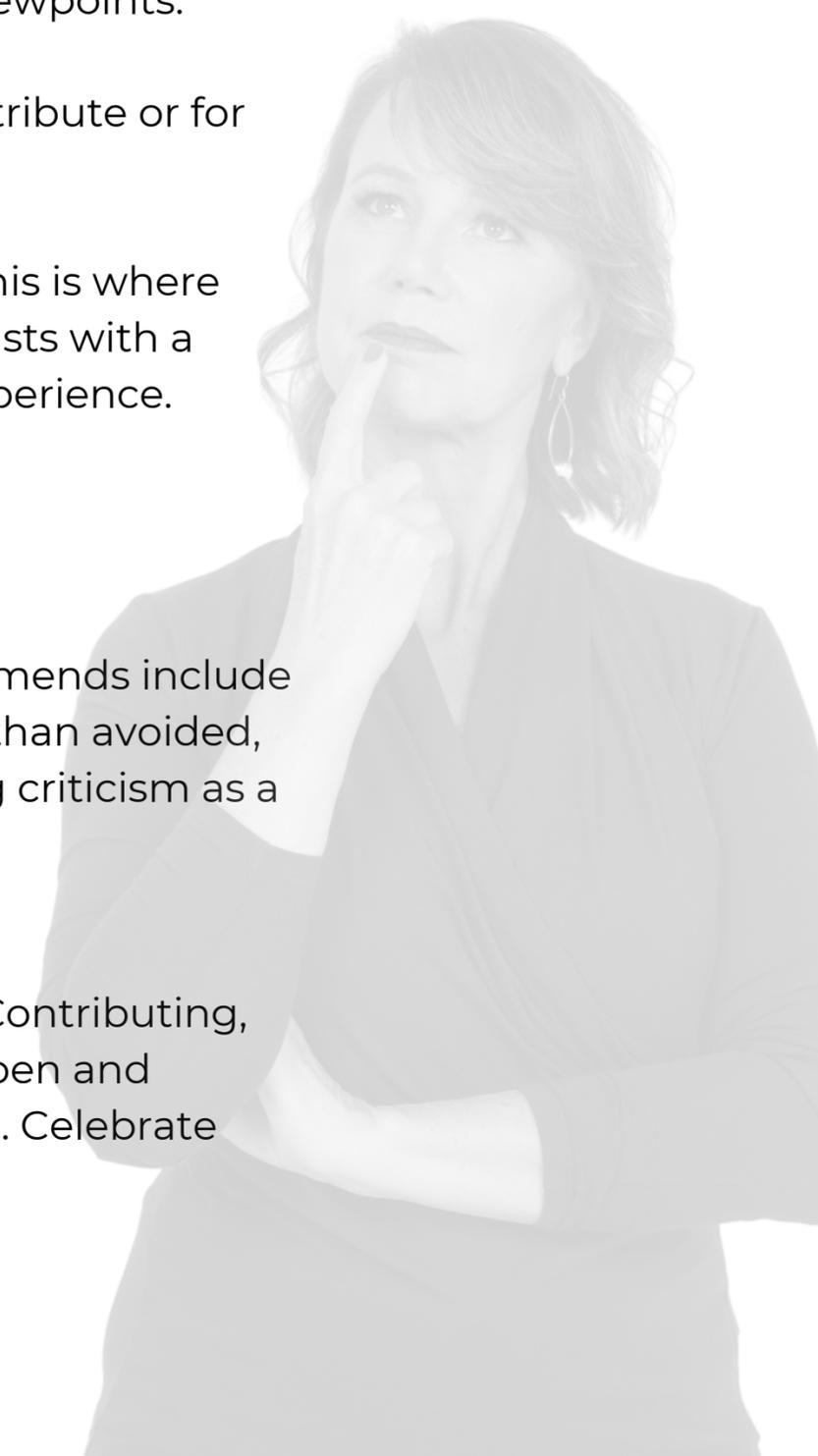
Dropping the need to be right creates space for the possibility of growth.

Solution 7: Adopt a growth mindset

In her book *Mindset*, Dr Dweck (8) outlines how to adopt a growth mindset. Some of the strategies she recommends include adopting the belief that intelligence can be developed, seeing challenges as problems to be embraced rather than avoided, persisting in the face of setbacks rather than becoming defensive, seeing effort as the path to mastery, viewing criticism as a way to learn and finding lessons and inspiration in the success of others.

Here's an idea:

In addition to providing solutions, practise contributing thoughts, reflections and ideas and asking questions. Contributing, rather than solving, helps you practise letting go of the need to be right and helps you re-train yourself to be open and curious. It can also be useful to consciously create an intention to acknowledge others input and support them. Celebrate other people's successes and look for ways to learn from them.



Barrier 8: My voice sounds weak – I mumble, stumble and shake.

Sharon Natoli

Speaking up means opening up and if being open has you feel uncomfortable, your body may be triggered to protect you by tightening up.

To get a sense of how this works, you may like to do an experiment. Stop reading, look straight ahead and open your mouth as wide as you can and relax your jaw. Hold this for 15 seconds. How did you feel?

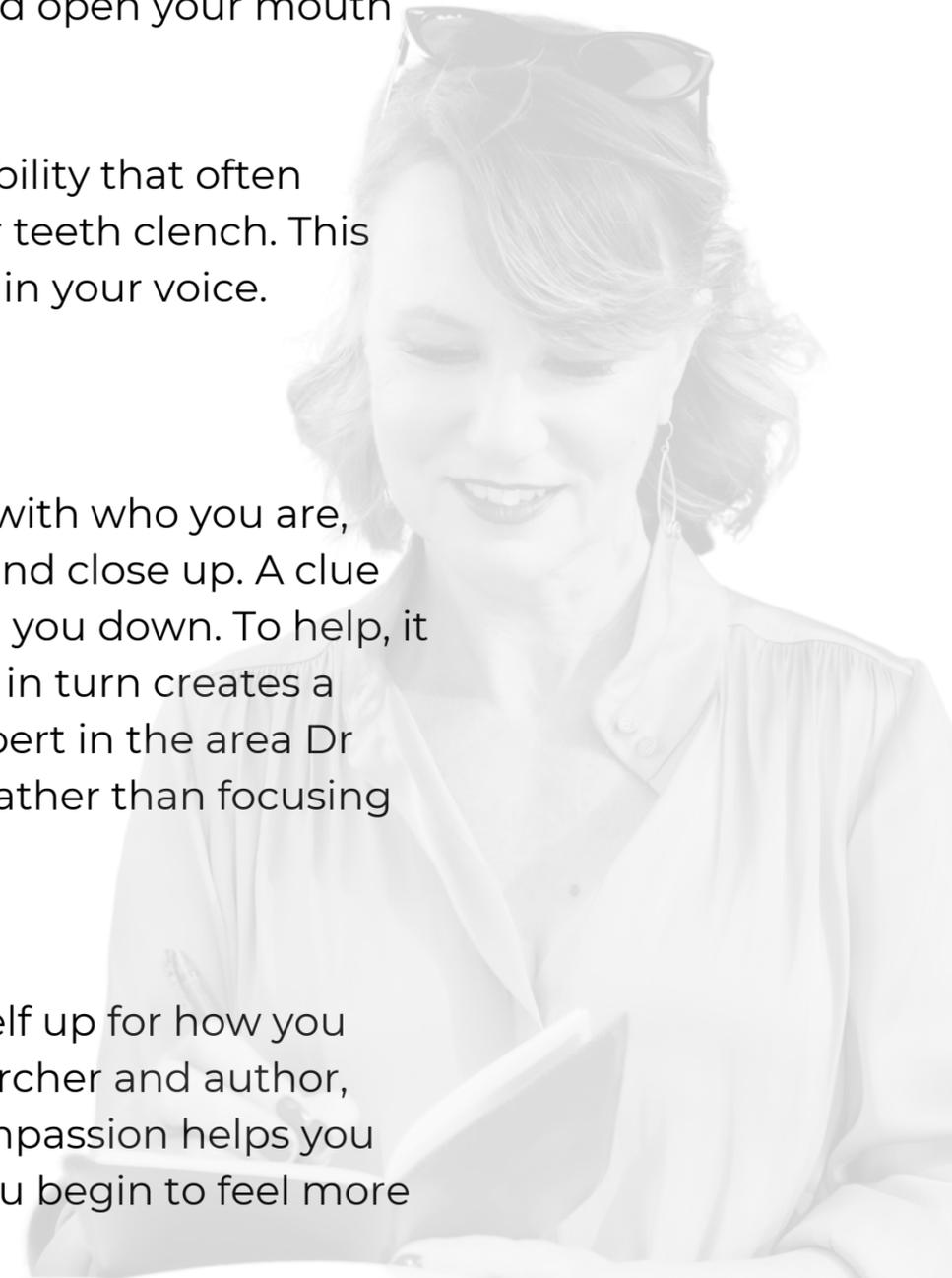
This exercise provides an insight about the link between opening your mouth and the feeling of vulnerability that often accompanies it. If your body reacts in the opposite, you will feel your jaw tighten, your lips close and your teeth clench. This makes it challenging to speak clearly and as a result, you may mumble or stumble and have little power in your voice. Putting power into your voice can be addressed by putting power into you.

Solution 8: Practise Self Compassion

The lack of power in your voice can be linked to a low level of self-acceptance. If you're not comfortable with who you are, you will feel less comfortable exposing yourself and be more likely to want to hide, make yourself small and close up. A clue this can be happening is that you consistently find you are 'beating yourself up'. Your self talk is dragging you down. To help, it can be useful to practise self-compassion. Self-compassion increases your level of self acceptance which in turn creates a greater sense of freedom to let go and be more of your authentic self. According to world renowned expert in the area Dr Kristen Neff, to practise self-compassion, speak to yourself kindly, look at how you are similar to others (rather than focusing on your differences) and be mindful of what you need in the present moment (9).

Here's an idea:

Notice your self-talk before and after you speak. What are you saying to yourself? Are you beating yourself up for how you sound or the words you are using? If this is the case, try this useful phrase recommended by social researcher and author, Brene Brown. Say to yourself *'I'm doing the best I can right now with the resources that I have.'* Self-compassion helps you get more comfortable with simply being yourself. When you become more accepting of who you are, you begin to feel more comfortable about sharing your inner self and opening your mouth to speak.



Barrier 9: I feel like a rabbit in the headlights when everyone looks at me.

Sharon Natoli

Feeling like a rabbit in the headlights can occur when all eyes turn to you as you speak, or when you unmute yourself in an online meeting and your image becomes spotlighted in the centre of the screen. In that moment, you become the centre of attention and all your fears are triggered. *What if I say the wrong thing? What if my question isn't smart enough? What if I forget what to say?* and your nervous system kicks in. One of the clients in my coaching program said when she stands up to speak her thoughts “fly away like seagulls”.

In her book *The Loudest Guest*, Dr Amy Silver (10) says that when you are in fear, you can't make thoughtful or strategic decisions, you struggle with memory and you may even lose your ability to talk. The key therefore is finding ways to turn down the volume of the voice of fear at that moment when you stand up, or put your hand up, to speak.

Solution 9: Dial Up Your Power and Presence

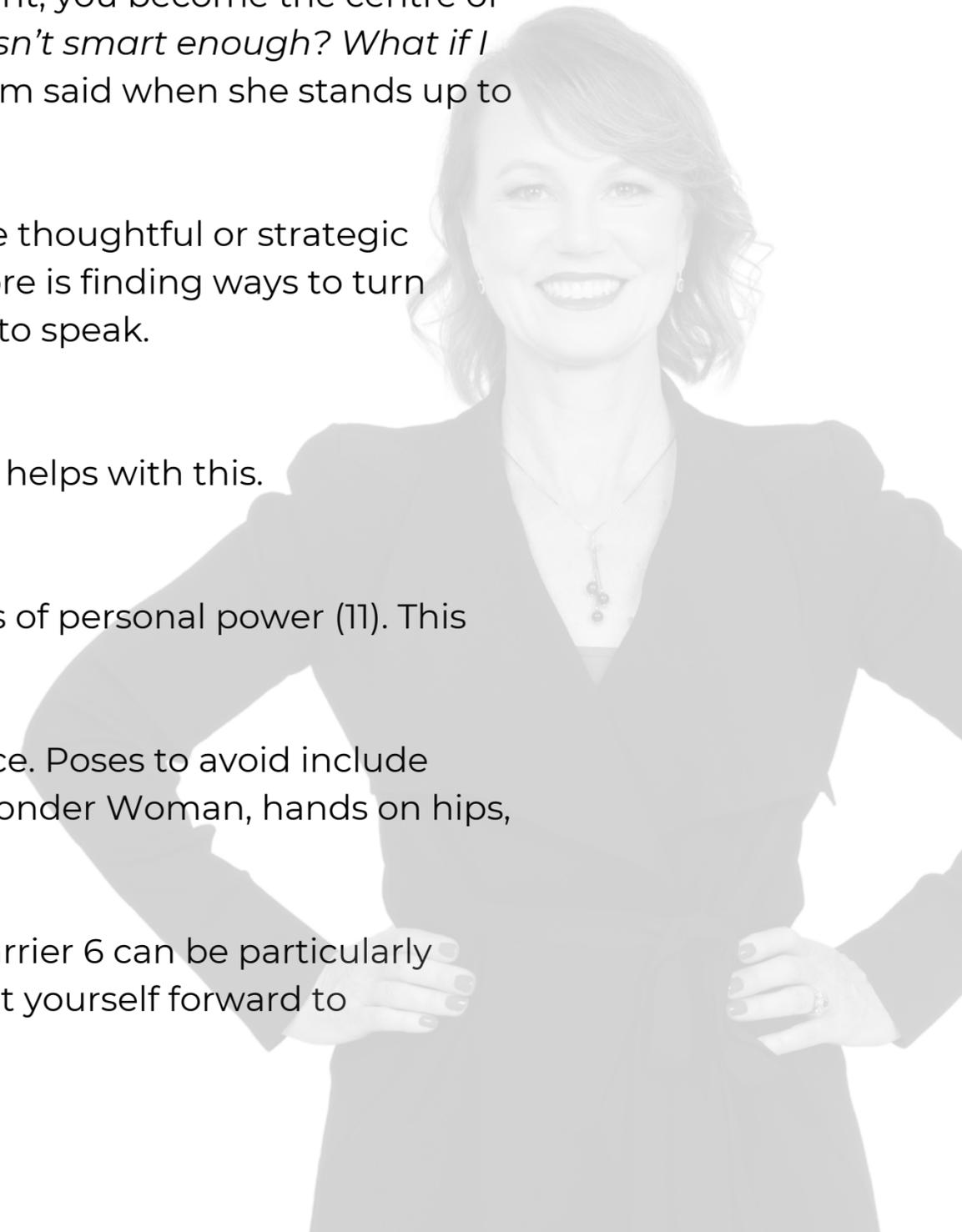
Centring yourself in your power and maintaining presence during the conversation or meeting helps with this.

Here's an idea:

Research by social psychologist Amy Cuddy has found adopting power poses increases feelings of personal power (11). This means you can use your physicality to tap into your power in the immediate moment.

Power poses include standing and sitting up straight, leaning forward and taking up more space. Poses to avoid include crossing your arms and legs, touching your neck, and making yourself smaller. Standing like Wonder Woman, hands on hips, for 2 minutes before a meeting can also provide an instant rise in feelings of personal power.

Combining this immediate access to personal power with the breathing activity outlined for Barrier 6 can be particularly useful for reducing the possibility that you'll feel like a rabbit in the headlights next time you put yourself forward to contribute.



Barrier 10: I hold back when others with more power are present.

Sharon Natoli

You may find you can speak up without holding back in many situations but when someone with more power is present you feel intimidated and hold back. This could be your boss, or a board member, someone you admire or a person you want to impress or please.

In his 2016 TED talk titled *How to Speak Up for Yourself* (12), social psychologist and professor of leadership and ethics at Harvard University, Adam Galinsky, outlined the link between speaking up and personal power. His research found that despite common belief, speaking up is not a gender issue – it's a power issue.

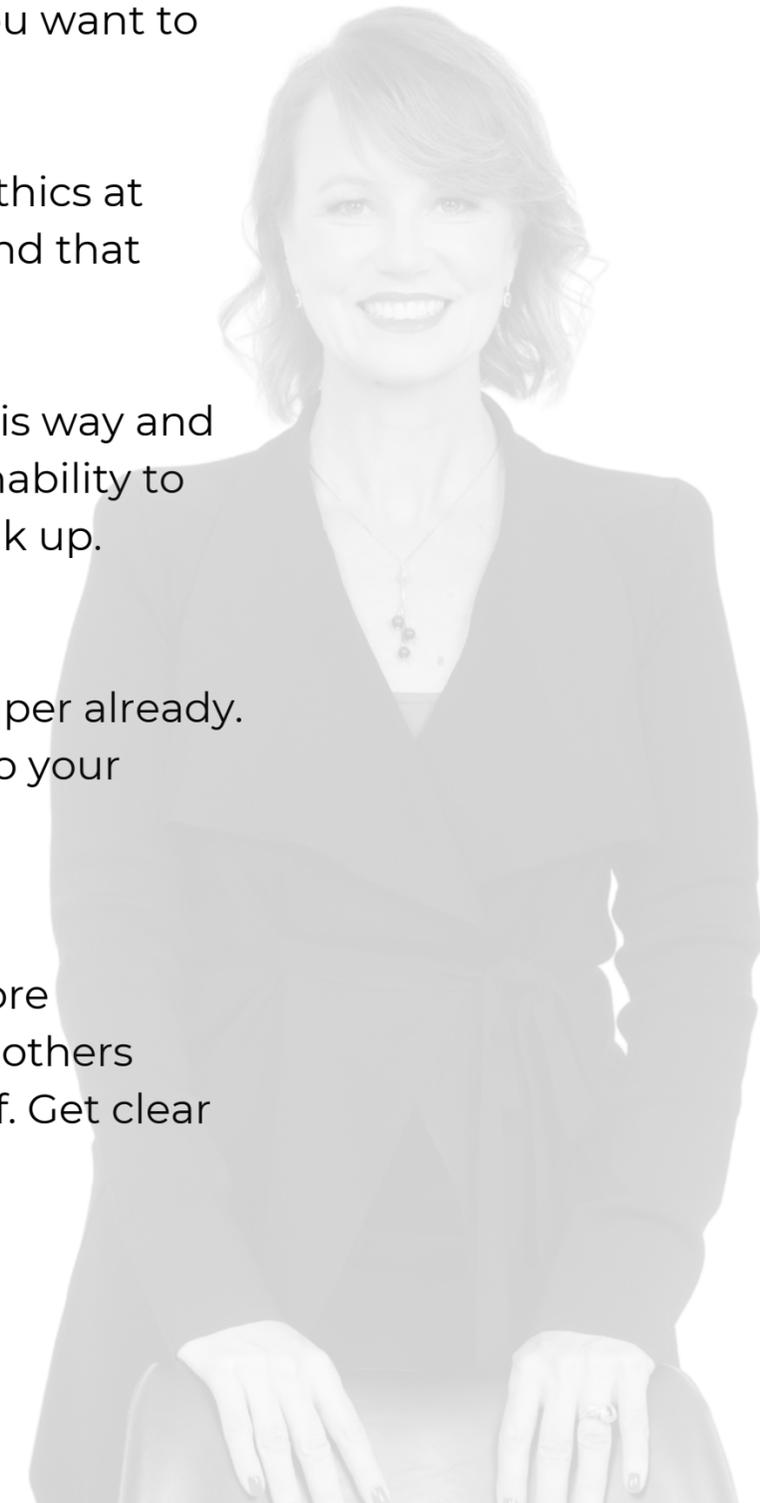
Without power, you become like a speed boat without an engine, bobbing up and down in the water, turning this way and that dependent on the direction of the waves and the external circumstances. You feel a lack influence and an inability to control your direction. Conversely, the more power you have the more likely you are to influence, direct and speak up.

Solution 10: Hold Onto Your Personal Power.

You can hold on to your personal power in many ways and some of these have been outlined throughout this paper already. Trusting yourself, developing self-belief, speaking to yourself through a voice of self-compassion and tapping into your physicality all help. Another useful strategy is to notice your language.

Here's an idea:

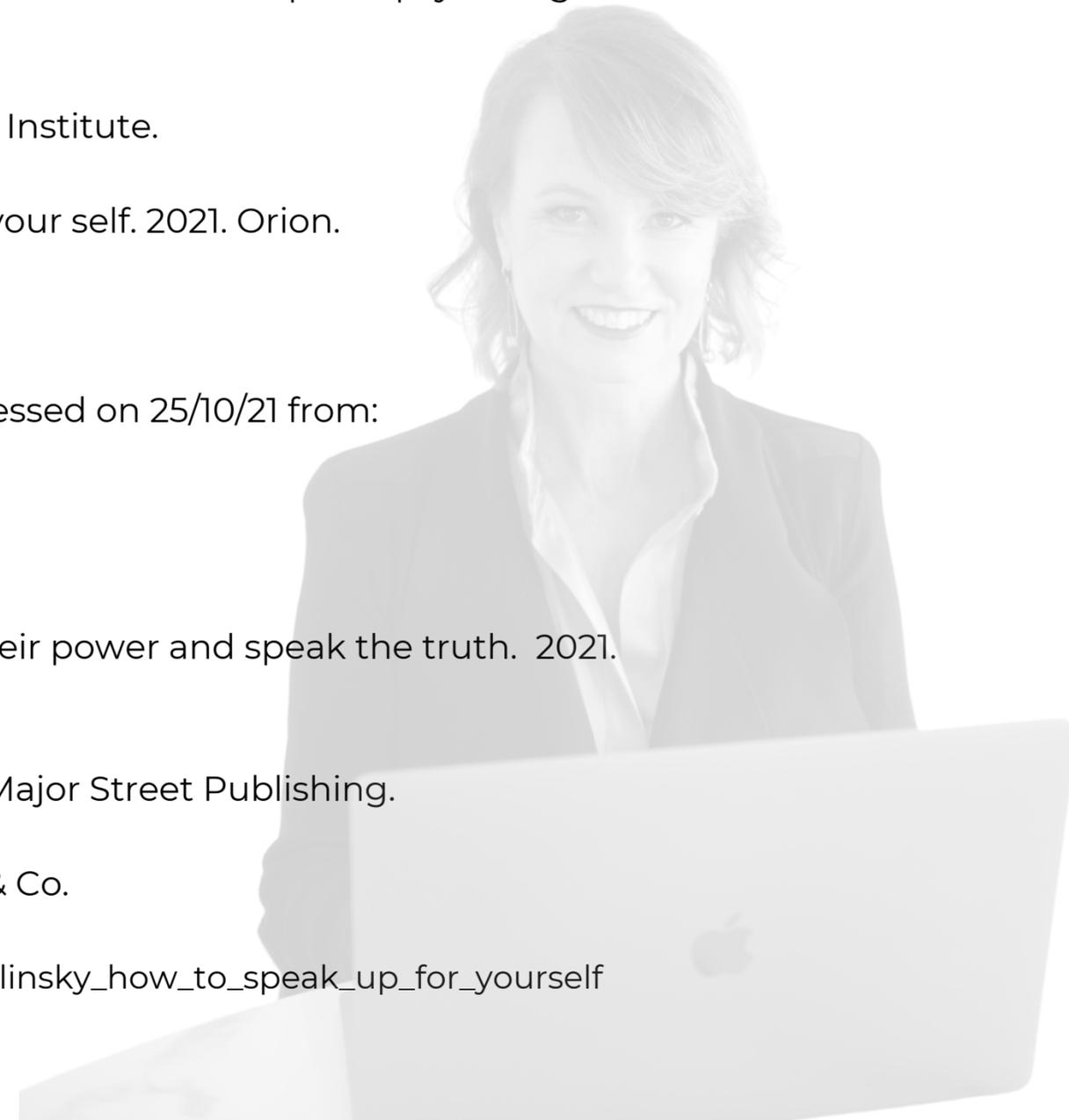
Personal power is not so much about getting what you want, as it is about being who you are. When you feel more comfortable with your authentic self, you can let go of some of the fears and concerns you may carry about how others perceive you. From this perspective, it can be useful to work on bringing out more of your true and authentic self. Get clear on what you want, practise self-trust and tune into your intuition.



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Sharon Natoli

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FIND YOUR VOICE - SPEAK UP WITH CONFIDENCE - 90 DAY COACHING PROGRAM

Sharon Natoli

If the concepts in this paper resonated with you and you'd like support to find your voice and speak up with greater influence and confidence, the Speak Up With Confidence 90 Day Coaching Program can help.

This program gives you the tools to break through the internal barriers that can hold you back so you can be seen, heard and valued, advance your career and make the workplace contribution you'd like to make.

The 90 day program teaches you how to:

- Identify faulty inner dialogue and the way it holds you back
- Discover your inner companion voices and amplify their presence
- Replace apologetic with authoritative language
- Stretch your boundaries to gain greater self confidence
- Tap into your personal power in any given moment
- Apply a variety of tools to help you speak up with confidence wherever you are
- Develop practises to remain calm when speaking under pressure
- Put energy into your voice to help you be heard

You will receive:

- An initial discovery session with Sharon
- Weekly personal coaching calls
- Weekly videos with accompanying homework
- Weekly worksheets and resources
- Access to Sharon's inspiration library
- Access to the private Facebook group for additional support

For further details, please get in touch:

E: info@sharonnatoli.com



ABOUT SHARON NATOLI

Sharon Natoli

Sharon Natoli helps individuals find their voice and speak up with confidence so they are seen, heard and valued in the workplace. Sharon believes when more people have the internal power to speak up and share their thoughts and ideas, not only do they experience greater engagement and personal freedom, organisational performance improves, collective intelligence is enhanced and workplace culture gets better.

Sharon is author of *Find Your Voice - Speak Up & Be Heard by Mastering Your Self Talk* (coming in 2022).

She has 30 years' experience in behaviour change counselling, media spokesperson roles, writing, speaking and as an advisor to organisations on communication and message development. Sharon combines her professional expertise in communication with her personal understanding and empathy for the challenges associated with finding your voice.

Sharon works with individuals seeking to lead their best and most authentic life and with organisations and leaders looking to empower their people to find their voice, speak up and more readily contribute their thoughts, opinions and ideas.

If the content of this document resonates with you and you'd like to learn more about Sharon's masterclasses and programs, please get in touch.



Sharon Natoli

M: +61 411 260 320

E: sharon@sharonnatoli.com

Enquiries: info@sharonnatoli.com

www.sharonnatoli.com

Instagram: @sharonnatolispeaks

