

Find Your Voice, Speak Up and Let the Awesomeness Begin

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“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” Marianne Williamson



There's good news and bad news in the workplace of 2015. The good news is that there has never been a better time to be an Assistant than right now. The bad news is that there is still far too much fear and suffering in silence going on. Too much leading by intimidation. Workplace bullying is rampant in America and all around the world too. All you have to do is ask an Assistant. Or read the jaw-dropping stories on the Assistant LinkedIn discussion groups that go on for pages and for weeks. You cannot make this stuff up.

The remedy? Speaking Up. Silence is our enemy.

For 25 years, I worked as a Celebrity Personal Assistant to Oscar winner Olympia Dukakis and I understand first-hand what it means to struggle to find your voice. Olympia taught me how to handle bullies because it happened to her too. I began my work with Olympia as the Public Relations director at the Whole Theatre in New Jersey where she was the Producing Artistic Director. In my twenties, I was very unsure of myself and my way of dealing with that was to stay quiet. After meetings, Olympia would ask other staffers, *"When is the tall one going to talk?"* True story.

Olympia was very encouraging and made it safe for me to speak my mind. In fact, she expected it. Thank you, Olympia. I now know that this is the hallmark of effective leaders. After a month or so, she joked that she couldn't shut me up. Seriously, what I learned from experience is that the very cool thing about finding your voice is that once you start, it gets easier and it is hard to stop. It's the getting started that's hard and nearly impossible for many. Operative word – *nearly*.

In my work with Assistants all over the world, I believe that the number one challenge Assistants face is to find their voices to speak up to their managers and colleagues. Assistants will say to me, *"Bonnie, I can't speak up. I'm afraid of losing my job."* I say, *"If you keep staying silent, I'm afraid you are going to lose you."*

Here's the thing. If you speak your mind respectfully, directly, and with specific details, you not only will *not* lose your job, you will mostly likely be setting the stage for a promotion, not to mention improved self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect and the respect of others.

The real-life success stories are revealed at our *"Be the Ultimate Assistant"* two-day workshops. The silence gets broken and there is no turning back. Fears, often irrational and unfounded, are faced squarely and with the support of others,

and guess what? Awesome things happen as a result!

Here are 5 reasons to Speak Up. All of these stories are true but some of the names have been changed. You know these Assistants.

1 Exciting new projects – Assistants see things that their managers don't. Hilary's executive is now doing speaking engagements all around the country and she is responsible for handling all the preparations. She noticed that there have been problems when he is on the road because her executive is challenged with all the details involved. For example, he almost missed his flight because he lost track of time speaking to people after an event.

Hilary loves to travel and thought that it would be smart if she travelled with her executive on his next trip but she was nervous to suggest it. After all, wouldn't he have asked her if he thought it was a good idea? She came up with a written proposal and mustered her courage to suggest the idea. The boss' response? *"Great! I didn't even think to ask you. Yes. Let's do that."* He has not missed another flight as Hilary now travels on most of the speaking engagements. They are both thrilled with the arrangement and Hilary is kicking herself that she didn't ask sooner.

2 Professional development opportunities – The email response came in less than 30 seconds. Brenda is the 20-year Assistant to a CEO and they have been working together for five years. They have a "great relationship." Brenda told me that she thought for two months about how to ask her boss about supporting her to attend the BTUA workshop. She felt afraid. What if he said no? Finally she mustered up the courage, chose her moment and hit "Send" on the email to the CEO with all the information about the training. Brenda nervously watched her monitor as the response came back. It said, *"Fine. Approved."* Brenda was over the moon and very proud of herself.

You don't get it if you don't ask. Speak up! Assistants all over the world are asking for support to get training and they are getting positive responses from their managers. The tide is turning. That is not to say that some managers don't say "no." Of course they do. The trick is to keep asking, to keep putting the requests in writing, and to make it clear how important training is for both you and your company. Be prepared to compromise and offer to pay a part of the cost. Putting "skin in the game" is a very successful strategy.

Brenda has now designed a yearly "Learning Plan" which includes several conferences that

she discusses with her executive who continues to see the value in investing in Brenda.

3 Bullies back down – *"I'm so sorry. I had no idea."* Angela's executive of three years was moody and often abusive. He yelled, used profanity, and publicly humiliated Angela and other staff. He ruled with fear and intimidation and most everyone was frightened to say a word. The stress level was off the charts because it was getting worse.

One day the executive pushed Angela too far and she snapped. She followed him into his office and closed the door. She told him that he was chasing good people away in droves and that the disrespect was intolerable. She told him specifically what he said and did that was offensive and that it needed to stop *"right now"*. Angela turned around, left the room, and went back to her desk. She was shaking but had zero regrets.

In a few minutes her boss came out of his office with tears in his eyes and said, *"I am so sorry. You are absolutely right. I had no idea my behavior was so bad. It won't happen again."* It didn't. The boss apologized to the rest of the team. The kicker? Angela has now been with her executive for 26 years.

We have heard stories similar to Angela's many times. Some students find it difficult to believe that a bully can be unaware but it is true. Standing up and speaking out directly and in detail is a strategy that is effective and reduces tremendous angst in the office.

The best book I know about workplace bullying is *"Taming the Abrasive Manager"* by Dr Laura Crawshaw who says that the key to stopping it is *awareness*. She says that it is very common for bullies to be "oblivious" and "clueless" to the destructive impact of their behavior. If that is true, then the only way to raise awareness is for Assistants and all targets of bullying to speak up. Don't wait one minute longer to do what you know is right.

4 Get the Raise! Don't be a 5-percenter – Catherine had been at her company for three years and had not received a raise for the last two. This was bothering her more and more because she always went above and beyond what she was hired to do. Her resentment was growing. She supported three executives who depended on her for most everything. Catherine did her research on what she should be earning and it was at least \$10,000 more than what she was making now. Plus, the company was doing really well. Catherine decided to ask for a meeting and prepared a written document outlining the following;

- The job description that she was hired to do
- The job description that she is actually doing
- A list of achievements from the past three years
- A list of projects that she is currently working on
- Ideas for a few new projects with brief summaries (for discussion purposes)
- A compensation history with a proposal for a revised salary

To Catherine's surprise, her manager was very receptive to the conversation and appreciated the document that Catherine prepared. They had a very productive conversation and Catherine realized that her manager thought that the Human Resources department was automatically giving Catherine an increase, which was not true. The manager would remedy the situation. The next day Catherine was informed of her increase in salary which was exactly what she proposed. Her manager told her to please speak up in the future about any compensation issues and everything else for that matter.

Are you a 5-percenter? Only 5% of women will negotiate a compensation package when it is presented. In general, women find it difficult to ask for money and prefer to hope that managers will automatically see their value and give them more money. Women don't ask because we fear not being liked, according to the Wharton School of Business. Not asking is a major contributing factor to the wage gap between women and men. If you want to make more money, speak up and ask for it. You will be liked *and* respected.

5 Problem with a co-worker? Don't quit!

– At least not before you have a conversation with her. Shannon and Kelly work in the same department as peers and they often need to work with one another on projects. They have not socialized very much. Recently Kelly has been abrupt and edgy. She dropped the ball on an important project and Shannon handled it by staying late at the office. Not only did Kelly not say “thank you”, she sent a cold email demanding a follow-up report. Shannon began

to feel like Kelly disliked her. After several weeks of this, Shannon was tempted to quit or at least ask for a transfer. The stress was affecting her and she no longer enjoyed coming to work.

Another co-worker urged Shannon to say something to Kelly. One day she took a deep breath and walked up to Kelly's desk and said, “*Can we please talk for 10 minutes? I have something important on my mind.*” They found an empty conference room and Shannon voiced her concerns. She saw Kelly's face change. She said, “*I am separating from my husband and I haven't been able to talk about it. I'm really glad you told me how you feel. I am very sorry.*”

This conversation changed everything. What Shannon learned is that when people behave in extreme ways, it is often about them and not you. Too many great Assistants working in terrific companies up and quit because of assumptions and fear from speaking up. Don't be one of them.

How do you do it? Here's the 6-step plan to speaking up

1 Prepare. Practice saying the words out loud. The more you say them out loud, the easier it will be to say them. Many Assistants will say that they don't speak up because they will cry. Practicing saying the words will minimize the chance of crying. The main problem with tears is that they diminish your message.

2 Pick your “battle” and choose your moment. Ask for time alone with the person. No public humiliation. What you need to say is between the two of you.

3 Stay calm, clear, and direct. Be specific and factual in your examples. Say, “It made me feel X when Y happened yesterday and Z happened last week.” Another great resource is *Speaking Your Mind in 101 Difficult Situations* by Don Gabor.

4 Allow the other person to save face. Say “*I know that you might not know how this impacted me so I felt it was important for me to tell you.*” Speak only for yourself and not for others.

5 Prepare something in writing to clarify what you are saying. Putting these ideas on paper communicates the seriousness of the issues.

6 Once you speak your mind, be quiet and wait. Tolerate the awkward silence until the response comes. Even if the person does not come around all the way, your relationship is forever changed. You are now known as a person who will not stay quiet when there is a problem and that is a very good thing.

Awesome things happen when you find your voice to speak up about the things that matter. Most of all, *you* matter. I am rooting you on. Please send me your success story to bonnie@bonnielowkramen.com.

about the author



Bonnie Low-Kramen's voice is one of the most respected in the administrative profession. The author of the bestselling book *Be the Ultimate Assistant*, she is known for her passionate commitment to all professional Assistants and to effecting positive change in the global workplace, believing that the way to do this is through speaking, education, training and writing. Bonnie travels the world teaching her “Ultimate Assistant” workshops. With trademark honesty and humor, she pulls the curtain back so that we can all lean in and take big bites out of those elephants in the room. www.bonnielowkramen.com.

