

You Don't Just Need One Leadership Voice — You Need Many

by Amy Jen Su

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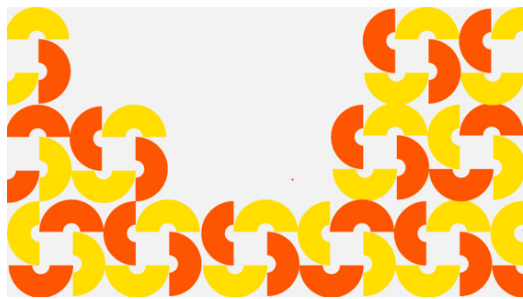
Summary. Many aspiring leaders focus on developing a more confident-sounding persona. But building true confidence starts with cultivating a multi-faceted leadership voice. First, consider the voice of your character. This is the part of your

voice that is grounded in... [more](#)

We often equate developing a leadership voice with finding ways to appear more confident. We assume that our success depends upon mimicking someone else, increasing our self-promotion, or saying things louder than others. But rather than living with imposter's syndrome, or feeling exhausted by wearing your game face all day, you can build a truer confidence by more intentionally focusing on cultivating many different parts of your leadership voice each day. Ultimately, you should cultivate enough parts of your voice so that no matter the leadership situation or audience you find yourself facing, you can respond in an authentic, constructive, and effective way. So, what are the various voices to access within yourself and cultivate over time? And what are the situations that warrant each voice?

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Your voice of character. First and foremost, consider the voice of your character. This is the part of your voice that is constant and consistent. It is grounded in fundamental principles about whom you choose to be and what guides and motivates your interactions with others. I've had leaders share that they hold key leadership principles in mind such as "Give the benefit of the doubt," "Don't take things personally," "Focus on what's best for the business," or "Be direct with respect" when

walking into a difficult conversation, meeting, or potential

conflict. Anchoring ourselves in the character we know we have keeps us from becoming chameleons, acting out of a fight-or-flight reaction, or only showing respect when there is a commercial gain or benefit — while being uncivil to others who we believe hold less value. A voice of character is ultimately about who you are and the intentions and motivations that guide your speech and actions.

Your voice of context. As you take on increasingly senior roles, your view and perspective of the business grow. You hold more of the big picture. Part of the job then becomes finding ways to express and communicate that bigger picture to others. Too often, in the race against time, we dive right into the details of a presentation, meeting, or conversation, without taking an extra few minutes to appropriately set the stage and share critical context. Places where you can bring more of your voice of context include:

- sharing vision, strategy, or upcoming organizational change with others
- presenting to executives, and being clear on what you are there for and what you need
- kicking off a meeting with your team and giving the bigger picture for the topic at hand
- making your decision-making criteria or rationale transparent to others

Your voice of clarity. In a world of high-intensity workplaces, you have the opportunity to be the voice of clarity and help your team stay focused on the most-important priorities. Leaders who envision new possibilities, muse out loud, or have knee-jerk reactions run the risk of teams trying to deliver on their every whim; these teams end up scattered, spread thin, and unfocused,

falling short on delivering on the most important wins. Here are a few ways you can be the voice of clarity to help channel others' energies more productively:

- At the start of the year, sit down with each direct report to prioritize and clarify what the big wins are in each of their areas. One client of mine shared how she asks each team member: “If we were to publish this in a newspaper, what would you want the big headlines to be for you and your team at the end of the year?”
- Periodically come back to helping your direct reports reprioritize what's on their plates. You can do this in one-on-one meetings or with your entire team.
- Empower your team to say no.

Your voice of curiosity. As a leader, you have a responsibility to give direction, share information, and make important decisions. But you need to be sure that you're not approaching every situation as if you have all the answers or as if you need to advise on, problem-solve, or fix everything in front of you. In many cases, being the voice of curiosity is a better choice for the situation. As one of my clients once shared about facing pushback from others, “While I'm confident in my own business judgment and instincts, I know that my organization has hired really smart people. Therefore, if one of my peers or team members has a different perspective or pushes back, I don't take it personally. I get really curious to understand where they are coming from first so that we can get to the best solution.” Some situations where bringing your voice of curiosity can help you and your colleagues move forward:

- when you're engaging in work that is interdependent, and a better solution will come from hearing all perspectives in the room before coming to a final decision

- when you're coaching a direct report, asking good questions to help them grow in new ways, explore issues they're facing, or support their career development
- when you're in a difficult conversation where hearing out the other person is an important part of diffusing emotion, understanding each party's needs and views, and then figuring out the best way forward

Your voice of connection. As your span of control or influence grows, it can become increasingly more difficult to make a connection with a broadening set of colleagues, strategic networks, and teams. We often have folks working for us many layers deep into the organization, such that we no longer know everyone in our area and still must find ways to stay connected and visible. Being a voice of connection can come in many forms. Some of the ways I've seen others do this effectively:

- Increase your skill as a storyteller. Stories make our points more memorable and salient. They can enliven a keynote address or an all-hands meeting, drive home a point we're making in a presentation, or help to close a large deal or transaction.
- Thank and acknowledge. Our teams and colleagues often go to great lengths to ensure that deliverables are met, revenues are strong, and customers are satisfied. When we use our voice of connection, we remember to express gratitude to a team that worked through the holidays to close on the financials at the end of the quarter, or we remember to loop back with a colleague who made a valuable introduction or referral for us.
- Making time for a few minutes of ice-breaking or rapport-building at the start of a conversation or meeting. So often, we want to get right down to business, so we skip the niceties or pleasantries that help to build relationships with others. Where possible, and especially with colleagues who value that kind of connection, spend a couple of minutes to connect before diving

into the work. On days where you're crunched for time, state that up front and transparently, so as not to create any misunderstandings. You can say something like: "I'm a little crunched for time today, so it would be great if we could dive right in."

Discovering and developing your voice as a leader is the work of a lifetime. The key is to stay open to an increasingly wide array of new situations and people. Use each situation as an opportunity to access more parts of your voice, rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach. Bring your voices of character, context, clarity, curiosity, and connection as the moment or situation warrants. Through this kind of learning and growth, not only will you increase your inner confidence and resilience, but you will also inspire the confidence of others around you in a more authentic and impactful way.

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