

# Top 10 Mistakes Businesswomen Make That Hurt Their Career!

## By Ellen Finkelstein

Do you have credibility? When you make a suggestion, do others accept it? The answer to these questions is key to your success, because it reflects the opinion others have of you. And those people make the decisions about whether you stay or go.

Times are tough and competition is fierce. Companies are looking for the maximum results from every employee and that's a challenge to you. But the way you're judged is often much more subjective than your performance review indicates, or your boss admits. Management gets a general impression of you from your public *persona*, and that sticks.

Here are 10 top mistakes women make that affect their credibility, and as a result, whether they get that promotion or even keep their job.

### Top Mistake #1: Lack of effective communication skills

Did you know that the stickiest part of the impression you make comes from how you speak to a group? Recent research at the University of California, Berkeley showed that people who spoke up and offered suggestions in a group setting were considered to be the most competent — regardless of the content of their suggestions! They were also judged to be more intelligent, dependable, and self-disciplined.

Here's another fact. Employers responded to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers on the importance of candidate qualities and skills. The results shows that while employers rated communication skills as one of their most desired characteristics, they also reported that those are the skills most lacking.

#### The damage of poor communication skills

Why are communication skills so important and what happens when a businesswoman has poor skills? The entire impulse that drives a business forward happens via communication. When miscommunication occurs, the result is:

- **Wrong decisions are made:** People don't understand the situation and act in a way that hurts the organization. Or they misunderstand and do a task incorrectly.
- **Necessary action is not taken:** People don't get the point, so they do nothing.

For these reasons, companies know that communications skills are important. Almost all performance reviews rate communication skills. You would think companies would provide training, but they rarely do. Instead, businesswomen without the necessary skills simply don't get promoted, or worse, lose their jobs.

Why are presentation skills so important? Although all communications skills are important, your boss doesn't really think about your conversational skills or even your written skills.

Instead, the skill that he or she sees, the one that makes the most impression, is how you communicate at meetings, in other words, presentation skills. Not all presentations are formal and use PowerPoint. But those types of presentations are the most watched of all. Each time you give a planned presentation, the people in the audience subconsciously grade you!

In basketball, sometimes a player passes a ball to the wrong location and causes a turnover. The coach rolls his eyes, thinking, “Miscommunication!” It can lose games and it can hurt your career.

## What should you do?

If you don’t have excellent communication skills, you need to get them—and fast. A presentation consists of 3 components:

- **Content:** You need well-organized points, clear logic, supporting data, a clear beginning and conclusion.
- **Design:** Your design needs to be clear and visual. Your supporting data needs to be readable by people in the back (what a thought!). Stay away from slides full of bulleted text—people will think you’re boring within 30 seconds and you’ll lose credibility!
- **Delivery:** Have a conversation with the audience and interact. Practice eye contact and using your hands appropriately. Avoid annoying habits like pacing, fidgeting, or fixing your hair.

All aspects of a presentation are important. Take the time to prepare each presentation thoroughly, and then practice. If that’s not enough, take a course.

## Top Mistake #2: Unconscious arrogance

That’s pretty strong language, but it’s true. Most people think only of their own point of view when they communicate. It’s why managers are taught in business school to close the feedback loop when they speak—to make sure their audience really understands.

You need to think of the needs of your audience. A sales rep knows that he or she has to think of the needs of the potential customer first. In the same way, your audience is like that potential customer.

## The damage of the self-centered approach

On a managerial level, this arrogance, or self-centered approach, can seriously harm an organization. How often have you seen managers fight to spend all the money in their budget, even when the money isn’t needed? Or make proposals that require their department to grow, regardless of whether it’s valuable for the organization as a whole?

When you present in a self-centered way, you don’t meet the needs of the entire organization. The results are that necessary action isn’t taken, wrong action is taken, or even that needless arguments arise. The cause of most arguments is that people can’t see the point of view of the others. It’s a disaster for the organization.

## **What should you do?**

When you present, let's say to recommend a course of action, you need to put yourself in the shoes of the decision maker in the room. This is called an audience-centered presentation. You might be thinking of technical issues, but the boss might be (or should be) thinking of long-term strategy.

You should know what your boss's priorities are, but if you don't, ask. When you're assigned a presentation, ask what's important, what the takeaways should be. Action steps? Market analysis? Each situation is different, but you need to know the goal of the presentation from the point of view of your boss.

In a formal presentation, you may not have advance access to the people in the audience. In this situation, you over-prepare, and ask questions when you get there. Involve the audience in the process and adjust on the fly.

## **Top Mistake #3: Misjudging the audience's knowledge**

You may be a technical person and work in a technical field. When you speak to management, they want and need information that can help them make a decision. A businesswoman was asked to advise management about a potential acquisition of a company. She provided techno-babble and legal-speak, which management didn't understand or appreciate.

On the other hand, your audience may be quite techno-savvy. If you oversimplify your content, they'll feel that you're insulting their intelligence.

## **The damage of misjudging the audience's knowledge**

Whether your content is too technical or too dumbed down, you're not giving your audience the information necessary to make a decision. Your presentation fails to meet the needs of your organization. Your reputation suffers.

## **What should you do?**

Find out in advance as much as possible about your audience. When you get the assignment to present, ask how technical the presentation should be. Ask what data is needed to help management make the decision. In this way, your presentation will hit the mark!

## **Top Mistake #4: Not having an opinion**

Many businesswomen think that all they need to do is inform management about a situation, but that's rarely the case. When you don't offer an opinion or a recommendation, managers often conclude that you lack self-confidence and can't come to a conclusion. They want you to show conviction!

With just facts and figures, it's hard for management to make conclusions. They value your knowledge and experience, which they need in order to make a decision.

## **The damage of not having an opinion**

When you don't stick your neck out and take the risk of offering your opinion, you lose credibility and respect. Remember that people who speak out are considered more competent and intelligent!

In addition, by not coming to a well thought-out conclusion, you don't provide management with the proper basis for making a decision. They may challenge your results, but this back-and-forth is just what's needed to flesh out all of the pros and cons of a situation.

### **What should you do?**

Even most internal presentations are, or should be, persuasive. Even if you're reporting on the status of a project, you should state your opinion and conclusions and try to persuade your audience that your conclusions are correct. So, come to a conclusion! Either present the conclusion first, and then justify it, or explain the supporting data you found and show how it led to your conclusion.

## **Top Mistake #5: Being illogical**

Your presentation should come to a logical conclusion based on the facts and data that you presented. When you do this, you'll be able to persuade your audience to accept your recommendations. When you don't, you'll appear to be weak, confused, and illogical. Not an ideal situation!

### **The damage of being illogical**

The audience expects you to make sense! When you haven't thought out the logic of your presentation, people wonder if you're intelligent and clear-thinking, or not. They doubt your critical reasoning skills which are so essential for a leader. That is not the way to get your next promotion!

### **What should you do?**

Make sure that the content of your presentation flows logically from beginning to end.

## **Top Mistake #6: Lousy presentations**

How many presentations have you attended that fit the description of "Death by PowerPoint?" Dozens? Hundreds? What do you do differently?

When you put up a bunch of bullet-laden, hard to read slides, full of text and incomprehensible graphics, you're sounding the death knoll for your career. After all, what do you think of others who do the same?

I see these mistakes over and over and it hurts. You've seen them too. Haven't you cringed as you sat through a Death by PowerPoint presentation? Where do your skills stand?

## **The damage of lousy presentations**

When you display a slide that contains all or most of the text you're saying, you almost have to read the slide. Did you know that one of the top complaints of audiences is speakers who read their slides to their audience? They actually find it insulting! "I can read!" they tell me.

Research has shown that the brain doesn't multitask very well. (This research has been used to justify laws that outlaw speaking on cell phones while driving in several states.) When you display that text-heavy slide and start to read it, the audience reads the slide. During that time, they aren't listening to you, even if you're adding information not on the slide. Really!

They can read faster than you can talk. When they're finished, they turn their attention to you. What do they discover? You're talking about points that they've already read! Boring! So they tune out. You lose the audience while they're reading the slide and again after they're finished.

When you use illegible fonts and colors, or create graphs that can't be read ("I apologize that you can't read this, but I'll explain it anyway"), the audience gets angry and annoyed.

Audiences don't like to be treated that way. And it's embarrassing to you.

The result is a lousy presentation. The audience doesn't get the point you're trying to make. People don't appreciate what you're saying. Good communication is lost, with all its consequences.

## **What should you do?**

Learn how to create slides that actually communicate. Make them visual and clear. Put one concept on a slide.

Keep slide design simple. Above all, avoid bullets and lots of text. You can use handouts for detailed notes and data. Stay away from silly clip art and overdone animation. (If animation doesn't help make a point clearer, don't use it.)

Read a book or take a course, if necessary. But make sure that your slides communicate clearly and look professional!

## **Top Mistake #7: Lengthy presentations**

Most people start losing interest about 10-15 minutes into a presentation. After that point, your audience misses a lot of what you're saying. This is the point where they tune out, and start texting, taking cell phone calls, or surreptitiously browsing on their laptops or BlackBerrys.

When you go over your allotted time for speaking, especially if you ramble and get off the main point, you get your audience angry. Is that what you want to do? It's inconsiderate and counterproductive, because people have other work to do.

## **The damage of lengthy presentations**

If you go on and on without change-up, people stop listening. This means that you're not communicating effectively. As mentioned in Mistake #1, the result is wrong decisions, inaction, and worse. This hurts your value to your organization, your reputation, and even your career!

When you speak longer than planned, one negative consequence is that there isn't enough time for questions and answers. This period of time is crucial for the decision-making process and the success of the entire presentation. People might have to leave for another meeting and the presentation might have to be rescheduled. Your audience gets very annoyed at you. Finally, you get a reputation for poor time management.

### **What should you do?**

If your presentation is long, you need to change the flow every 10-15 minutes. Ask the audience questions or take questions from the audience. Start a roundtable discussion or show a relevant video.

When you practice, time your presentation in advance. If it's longer than the allowable time, cut back. Make sure you build in time for questions and answers. So, if you have 1 hour to speak, make your presentation 45 minutes long.

## **Top Mistake #8: Being inflexible**

You speak to meet the needs of your audience. But if you don't include your audience in the process, you often won't be able to accomplish that goal. You probably don't know everything about your audience, so you need to respond to comments along the way. For example, if you start with a history of your project, your boss might say, "I know all that," so you need to skip that section on the fly and go to the next topic.

During a presentation, the decision-maker might ask a question that you hadn't planned on. If you don't have the answer, you'll look unprepared.

### **The damage of inflexibility**

If you don't allow for audience interaction, your presentation can completely miss the needs of your audience and your organization. That makes you ineffective.

When you don't have an answer to a question, especially on a topic that you should know about, your reputation for competence is harmed.

### **What should you do?**

Build audience participation into the presentation. For example, you can create a slide that functions like a menu, letting you quickly move to slides covering topics that the audience members indicate are important to them. You can also hyperlink to slides or entire presentations that you can show if the audience raises a point. By preparing supplemental content in advance, you'll be well-prepared!

Try to anticipate what questions will arise and practice answering them in advance. Do your research! If a question arises that you can't answer, offer to get the answer and report back as quickly as possible.

## **Top Mistake #9: Not practicing**

You need to practice your presentation before you give it. How many times have you seen a presenter who was embarrassed because he/she obviously didn't practice. Examples are flubbed openings and closings, avoidable technical difficulties, and obvious unfamiliarity with the presentation. You can avoid this humiliation!

### **The damage of not practicing**

Your reputation is on the line when you present. Mistakes caused by lack of practice show that you didn't care enough to take the time to do a good job. This doesn't impress your audience.

### **What should you do?**

Practice alone and time your presentation. Then practice and get feedback from someone who will objectively give you constructive criticism. Continue to practice until you can smoothly and confidently give your presentation. That's what's needed to do a good job!

## **Top Mistake #10: Poor speaking skills**

A part of presenting is public speaking skills. Many businesswomen (and businessmen, for that matter) simply don't have any. Their speaking skills are no better than those of a high school student.

They mumble, say "um" and "uh" every few words, avoid eye contact, don't know what to do with their hands, etc. It looks so unprofessional!

### **The damage of poor speaking skills**

Poor speaking skills make you look unprofessional. You appear to lack self-confidence and leadership skills. This is damaging to your career!

### **What should you do?**

Here are some guidelines for improving your speaking skills:

- Speak loud enough for everyone to hear.
- Avoid unnecessary filler words.
- You need to connect with your audience. Choose one person and look at him/her for a complete thought; otherwise, you're talking to air.
- Keep your hands comfortably at your side or use them for gestures.

Toastmasters ([www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)) is an excellent program for improving your speaking skills. If you can't take the time required, take a shorter presentation skills course.

### Where do I go from here?

It doesn't have to be this way. I've seen the damage and I want to help. I've helped so many people to present more effectively and I can help you, too.

*"I enjoyed your article and used many of your suggestions for my second speech at my Toastmaster's club. Prior to reading your article, I had designed a text-heavy slide show that included a colorful background. Based on your advice I changed my entire PowerPoint presentation so that there were only 7 simple slides with powerful graphics. The slides worked! The audience wasn't distracted by the slides and I felt in control of the presentation instead of the PowerPoint slides controlling my speech." -Melissa Kew*

*"Recently, when we were putting together a presentation on our homes for sale, we ... called Ellen Finkelstein and asked for her help. She zeroed in on exactly what knowledge we needed to easily create a professional-looking presentation. She knew the best way to add a voice-over, helped us download the program, and offered great tips that made the whole process easy for us. Miraculously, she did all this in a short, one-hour consultation. Consulting with Ellen made all the difference for us." -Nancy Walker*

I've given dozens of seminars and webinars, too. But I realized that these efforts weren't enough, so I created my 3-day transformative workshop, **Create an Outstanding Presentation!**

This workshop guides you through the entire process of creating a presentation. It will change the way you prepare, write, design, and deliver—and it will change your career.

The workshop is coming up October 7-9, so there's no time to delay! And there are only 8 seats being sold so that everyone gets personal attention! Find out more today!

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