

A Note from Kara: “Slow Down Your Speech to Speed Up Comprehension”

While speaking, the biggest favor you can offer yourself and your audience is to slow down. I offer this advice to leaders who communicate in their native language as well as to those who don't. Slowing down your speech not only allows you better control of your content, helping you to be more concise and intentional, but it also helps you to enunciate better so that audiences can understand every word.

To practice, try speaking a sentence aloud with exaggerated slowness. See whether you can close your mouth between words. It may sound like, “We. Suggest. Increased. Personnel. On. This. Project.” I know: It's incredibly awkward. But this exaggeration of articulating each word helps build the muscle memory around speaking more slowly. When you speed up to a conversational pace, cue yourself with the word “slow.” By practicing with exceptional slowness, your new slow pace may not feel quite as uncomfortable.

With practice, you'll find that slowing down your speech will help you minimize filler words, choose your language more carefully, and elevate your leadership presence—no matter what language you speak.

Leading as an LGBTQ Person

In 2016 two of my colleagues, Sarah Soule and Tom Wurster, launched a bold new executive program, the first of its kind: a week-long summer institute for LGBTQ leaders. This straight tenured ally and gay former Boston Consulting Group managing director did more to change the

dialogue about LGBTQ leaders at Stanford (and beyond) than any other single program or effort to date. Their vision was clear: to provide support and education for senior leaders aspiring to be in the C suite, but not yet there. As of 2019 only three publicly traded firms are led by out LGBTQ leaders: Tim Cook at Apple, Jim Fitterling at Dow, and Beth Ford at Land O'Lakes. We truly have a great need to change the pipeline.

A Note on Labels

I will often use the acronym LGBTQ for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer”; but sometimes for variety I may simply say “gay.” I struggle with label usage here, as I am a fierce advocate for inclusion and know that “LGBTQ” falls short for some with identities beyond those five letters. Yet I am an equally fierce advocate for clear and concise writing. I’m trying to balance both here. Those who are even more “woke” than I am include “+” at the end to include an even wider audience, but I’ve not yet adopted this particular convention.

Sarah and Tom invited me to be a part of the inaugural faculty group and have continued to invite me back each year. Through this work with hundreds of remarkable executives from across the globe, I was able to craft and polish the model that follows in this section. Each year it changes a bit more, but I’m delighted with what has evolved and have shared it with both gay and ally leaders at a wide range of firms, including Amgen, Bloomberg, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, and Google, as well as non-profits like Columbia University, Out & Equal, Reaching Out MBA, and the Victory Fund.

Many leaders not in the LGBTQ community have remarked that the model I'm about to share doesn't just apply to the LGBTQ community, but to all of us. While I concur, I continue to teach this model specifically to the LGBTQ leaders I serve, using unique examples from that community. As a gay man myself, I entered and matured in the workforce with few mentors and role models to guide me. That is why those resources I did have stood out to me as particularly valuable. In the early 1990s, I worked at three different educational firms for Mark Mishkind, who was my first out gay mentor. He offered me more than I think he knows about the challenge of leading in spite of marginalization. A full 15 years later in 2007, when I was hired at the GSB, I was still the first out gay faculty member the school had ever appointed. I did learn later an out lesbian had retired that spring, but for many years, we two were the sum total of the GSB's out LGBTQ hires. While younger leaders today have many more examples to rely upon than I had, marginalization still exists, particularly when we look at this personal identity on a global scale. That is why providing resources that speak to this community continues to be crucial.

Begin with a blank white canvas. For me this represents authenticity. I strongly urge all gay leaders to decide for themselves what is authentic. Some are closeted at work and out in other parts of their lives; some are introverts, others extroverts; some are more discreet while others, like me, bring up my husband and kids when appropriate in a business context (like right here!). But leaders must do the important "inside job" of deciding who they are and what aspects of their gender identity and sexual orientation they wish to share with their world at work. While I am a huge advocate, on a cultural and corporate level, that we should all be "out and proud," on an individual level I recognize that this choice is highly personal. No one can force a choice of expression on another. We all must come to our own decision of what works for us and what is authentic for us.

And while I have amassed a large number of communication examples from leaders in the gay community, I also think we lose our individuality if we try to present exactly like Frances Frei or Megan Rapinoe or Pete Buttigieg or Maeve DuVally or any of the tens of thousands of other out LGBTQ leaders I could name. We must all be our own authentic selves first and foremost. Against this canvas of authenticity, however, I see four distinctions that can help leaders expand their presence as someone who happens to be LGBT and/or Q. On top of this blank canvas I illustrate the LGBTQ Leadership Presence Radar, which contains four points: Confidence, Competence, Connection, and Clarity (Figure 6.1). Each of these four dimensions provides unique challenges and opportunities for leaders like me. While a perfect lavender diamond is aspirational (like mastery, perfection never comes), it points a direction for leaders to pursue.

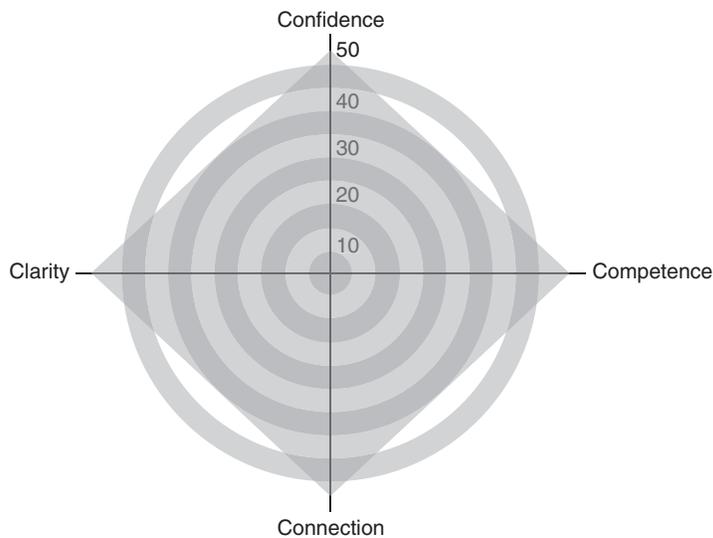


Figure 6.1 Lavender diamond of LGBTQ presence

(Side note: Over time, “LGBTQ Leadership Presence Radar” became too much of a mouthful to say (or remember) so now

I simply call this the Lavender Diamond framework or “The 4 C’s.” The original illustration of this framework was inspired by the work of Daniel Diermeier in his stellar book *Reputation Rules*. He created the Trust Radar for crisis communication, which had the elements of empathy, transparency, expertise, and commitment. The greater leaders score on these four points, the greater trust they build with the community. I encourage you to read his book, particularly if looking at the art of communication and management in a crisis.)

Confidence: Stepping into Your Power as a Leader

We’ve already covered much of this concept earlier in our book, but it’s a different issue for those who don’t identify as straight. Many of us have for years heard negative messages about our being gay or coming out. Whether overt or subtle, almost every gay person I know has experienced some level of homophobia, heterosexism, or (at its worst) outright discrimination or violence. Often, this comes at the hands of family members or religious leaders whom we may cherish and respect. This can result in an experience of internalized homophobia (defined as the involuntary belief by members of the gay community that the homophobic lies, stereotypes, and myths about them are true). When we have a strong interior voice saying, “You aren’t good enough,” it’s really challenging to step past that and put yourself out in the world as a leader, even if you’re not discussing issues related to your sexual orientation or gender expression. So the first step for many in our community is to “go within before going out” and be clear about our choices and intentions in communication. This doesn’t require counseling or therapy (though that has massively helped me), but it does likely involve conversations with others. Relying on a mentor you respect or your significant other can empower you to be ready to share powerfully from this place.

Once this step is complete, I point people to the guidance and resources covered in our earlier chapter on anxiety management.

As we discussed in our earlier conversation about anxiety management, I do find that striking expansive power poses and reframing the thought “I am anxious” to “I am excited” are two of the most powerful and actionable elements to consider.

Finally, I challenge leaders to consider: “If not you, who?” It may be uncomfortable to be the first openly trans leader in a firm or industry, but somebody must go first. And, by going first, we honor our LGBTQ ancestors who came before us and may inspire the younger generation to go even further. Each year I get to address the NextGen Leaders group (<https://leadnextgen.org/>), which brings together a diverse and inspiring group of LGBTQ leaders under 30 to help hone their leadership skills. I remind them that they stand on the shoulders of greatness. Were it not for Bayard Rustin, Maggie Stumpp, Audrey Lourde, Harvey Milk, and others, we would not enjoy the rights and privileges we have won. We owe it to them to make the most of the rich opportunity we’ve been given.

Finally, it bears repeating: Anxiety is not just common . . . it’s natural. Courageous leaders don’t speak and write without fear, but in spite of it. Be bold. Be confident. Step up. Speak out.

Clarity: Removing Doubt and Ambiguity from Your Communication

Strong leaders deliver clear, unambiguous messages that we can easily recall. In 2018 Frances Frei broke decades of tradition at TED with her talk: She used a blackboard! She also provided a beautiful system for structuring messages with your main point first, diagrammed as a triangle. She recounted the story of her year-long sabbatical from Harvard Business School to take on the senior vice presidency for leadership and strategy at embattled rideshare company Uber. She wove the need for clarity and authenticity together beautifully. One iconic moment is when she guides leaders to make their points at the beginning of their remarks in a meeting; that way, if you get cut off, you will still get credit for having made the point.

It often takes more time to write and speak clearly. It requires drafts and revisions. It often involves getting tough feedback from others, then iterating based on that input. But by following the approaches we advocate throughout this book, you can make your points clear, memorable, and actionable. One such example is Erin Uritus's 2018 address to the entire Out and Equal Conference at their annual summit. With rich rhetoric, she was able to introduce herself, honor her predecessor, and call the audience to engage more deeply. This feat proved particularly challenging as a bisexual in the LGBTQ community; I've had some bisexual students say it feels like the LGTQ community.

Competence: Increasing Credibility Through Good Work and Good Prep

As we round the corners of the diamond, we come to competence. In my view, competence has two components. The first is communication competence (or mastery, if you will) in writing and speaking—the core subject of this book. If you struggle with writing skills or fear public speaking, it's crucial to advance yourself where you struggle. Seek out a coach, take a course, establish a peer relationship for accountability; do whatever it takes so that your competence as a communicator won't be questioned. When I read an email with typos in it, or hear a speaker using frequent filler words, I begin to question the credibility of the leader. Even as an educator I don't give room for “a good try” or people who have “gifts in other areas”; I wonder why nobody has proofed their work or coached their delivery. We all must communicate all the time; it's the one skill that translates across all fields and careers. We need to get this one right, particularly the higher we climb in an organization. Leaders experience scrutiny in so many ways. We do not need to hand our critics reasons to doubt us. Remember Kim Scott's story about Sheryl Sandberg's feedback on Kim's “um's” that we covered earlier. It's up to us to shore up

the basics of leadership communication. You likely know this since you are reading this book, but it's important enough that it bears repeating.

But the second aspect of competence is even more crucial for LGBTQ leaders: being technically competent at our jobs. When we do good work, we increase our credibility more than any other action we can take. It's harder for me to provide clear tips and strategies on this point, because my readers will come from such diverse career fields. You will need to establish the expectations for your particular role, then ensure you can do these effectively. Again, the demand here is not for perfection, but competence. We all need to take on stretch assignments where we don't always know what's expected, but we likewise need to do our best to come up to speed quickly and leave no room for detractors to attack us. This is particularly crucial for those who are the first in a particular firm or career. I felt some of this when I came to Stanford as the first out gay member of the faculty in 2007.

The most vivid example of this that I can recall was from a panel at the December 2016 Victory Fund conference. This event, just weeks after the election of President Trump, was expected to be a celebration of sorts—but the outcome of the election changed all that. Conference organizers scrambled to revise the agenda so that it met the needs of our new reality as an LGBTQ community. One panel at the event was comprised of six ambassadors who had been appointed by President Obama. All six gay men knew they were going to be displaced on the day of Trump's inauguration. They shared powerful stories of what it was like to serve as out gay leaders in such high-profile positions, sometimes in countries where the culture did not embrace same-sex relationships. Two of the ambassadors, James Brewster (assigned to the Dominican Republic) and Ted Osius (assigned to Vietnam), spoke of being in the green room after their senate approval, but before being announced and sworn in. They both knew they were going to countries that would be unlikely to embrace (and more likely to oppose) them and their husbands.

Brewster shared with Osius, “We’d better do our jobs really, really well. All eyes will be on us.” In that one statement he beautifully summarized what I mean by the necessity for competence in our profession. Leaders under scrutiny must be competent communicators, but also competent in their jobs. Leave no room for people to have justified cause to criticize; they will find enough unjustified reasons to do so!

Connection: Reaching Your Audience with Vulnerability and Storytelling

Admittedly that last section might feel a bit negative. As my friend and mentor Nancy Duarte says in her book *Illuminate*, we need to have both “encouraging” and “warning” communications to cause a difference in the world. So let’s move from a rather “warning” component of the leadership presence radar to a more encouraging one: telling stories. The easiest tool to connect with your followers is to be a storyteller. Stories bridge the unfamiliar with the familiar; stories entertain, illuminate, and last. Years later my students can recall stories from my teaching more than the actual content or principles I taught. (As long as my stories were there to illustrate a point, I’m fine with that judgment by alumni.)

We’ve already dedicated some time to storytelling earlier in this section, so here I merely want to emphasize the value and power of authentic stories from our own unique perspective. It’s not that as leaders we must tell our entire sordid coming-out story each time we address a group, but rather that we should feel as comfortable sharing stories about our lives, interests, and families just as our non-gay colleagues do. Let me offer two examples from my own life.

When teaching a workshop I will often weave in some elements of my own life. I will say something like, “My husband Ken and I adopted our oldest son from foster care when he was 16. Toby arrived in our home with an unrealistic expectation about what his

dads were willing to fork out for sneakers.” These are the opening few lines of a story I tell in my storytelling with data lesson; the relevance is that in his quest for sneakers, Toby shared a TED@IBM talk by Josh Lubber with me that changed my view on the value of sneakers on the secondary market. The point I make in class is that Josh used a powerful illustration of data to close his talk, and Toby’s reuse of that data on me was compelling. But by adding in that I have a husband and that we have kids through adoption, I connect with other parents in the audience while (perhaps) challenging their stereotypes of gay men. I come out by telling a story that’s decidedly *not* about coming out.

Here’s a second example from the spring of 2019. In addition to attending the church my husband pastors, I also attend my own church, a remarkable Roman Catholic parish in the heart of the Castro, Most Holy Redeemer. This year on the feast of Pentecost I hosted a group of Stanford MBA students from the school’s Catholic Student Association. I love getting to share the joy and power of MHR with others, especially students who’ve never seen a gay-friendly Catholic parish. After communion I was standing behind the group of students and looking toward the priest at the altar. I realized that my group not only included several straight students with their young children, but some gay students at different places in their own coming-out processes. By my invitation, I was able to expose all of them to the rare experience of LGBTQ people of faith in a Catholic context. When I tell this story, I’m able to share not just the unexpected intersection of Catholicism and LGBTQ identity, but the commonality of simply “going to church on Sunday.”

Admittedly it may be a bit easier for those of us with spouses and families to “come out with ease” in a talk or blog than it is for single leaders; but with clarity and creativity we can find ways to bring our full selves into our communication. I don’t believe I “wear my gay identity” on my sleeve, but I also don’t shy away from it. I grew up with a scarcity of role models. I want to do my part to be sure I’m

exemplifying the challenges and rewards of my life fully for those with whom I write and speak.

Pulling It All Together: The Lavender Diamond

Over the years this model has evolved quite a bit; the terms shift, the order changes, and the examples are updated each time I teach it. In fact, I hesitated to include this section for fear it would be outdated between when I hit *submit* on the manuscript and when I held the first printed copy in my hands. But the lesson remains consistent: against a canvas of authenticity we all want to strive to be confident, clear, competent, and connected communicators. The challenges are great, but in my mind even greater for LGBTQ leaders. Yet the rewards for us leaders and those who follow us are worth the risk. Aspire to extend your own lavender diamond a little further each time you write or speak.

Leading as a Woman

Recently a team of students delivered a final presentation in my strategic communication class. The topic they chose to present was “Speech Starters.” Ilana, a first-year student with generally excellent delivery skills, began in role-play mode, pretending to deliver a very poor opening. A peer, Sam, entered the role play by interrupting her after about 30 seconds: “Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ilana, stop. I need you to stop right there. That is not how you want to start a presentation. That was rough. The opener to a presentation is the most important part. Why don’t you sit down, take a look, and we’ll teach you the right way to start a presentation.” Seven minutes later, after her peers had covered the content of designing a compelling opening, she returned and delivered a great opening (as expected). This “wrong way/interrupt/lesson/right way” construction is common for these final presentations and serves as a playful and easy way to get the class’s attention, make some key points, and demonstrate the goal.