

# Shy at work? 7 ways to speak up

By [Anne Fisher, contributor](#) May 31, 2013: 10:31 AM ET

**Some of us lack the self-confidence to say anything in meetings, especially when higher-ups are in the room. Here's how to change that.**

FORTUNE -- **Dear Annie:** A friend sent me a recent *Fortune* [article](#) about how women need to learn to "conquer confidence killers" in order to be more visible at work. I can really identify with that, even though I'm a guy, because I have always been too self-conscious to speak up and express my ideas. (Even as a student, I never raised my hand in class.)



The reason I'm writing to you is that just this morning, for the thousandth time, I was in a meeting where I thought I had a great solution to a complicated problem my team is facing, and I was right. How do I know? Because I didn't say a word, but the guy sitting next to me suggested the same thing I was thinking -- and, as a result, got put in charge of a project I'd love to have been assigned. It's clear that, if I'm ever going to get anywhere at this company, I have to start talking more, but how? Do you or your readers have any practical suggestions? -- *Quiet Man*

**Dear Q.M.:** "The average employee spends about one-third of his or her work week in meetings, so they're the best opportunity you have to make your expertise known," notes Joel Garfinkle, an executive coach who has worked with dozens of managers who, like you, were reluctant to share their ideas at Google ([GOOG](#)), Apple ([AAPL](#)), Oracle ([ORCL](#)), Microsoft ([MSFT](#)), and many other companies. Garfinkle also wrote a terrifically practical book you might want to check out, *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*.

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People hesitate to speak up for all kinds of reasons, he observes, ranging from simple shyness, to perfectionism (wanting to have all the details nailed down before saying anything), to fear of confrontation (the belief that disagreeing, especially with a boss, is too risky). But, whatever is holding you back, Garfinkle offers these seven suggestions:

**1. Don't underestimate the value of your ideas.** As you noticed (again) in that meeting where the other guy got the plum assignment, you do have a lot to contribute. So, before your next meeting, give yourself a little pep talk. "Remind yourself of your capability and knowledge," says Garfinkle. "Others believed in you enough to help you reach your current level. Now it's your turn to believe in yourself."

**2. Be among the first to speak.** "Look for opportunities in each meeting to make your presence known early on, ideally in the first 10 minutes," Garfinkle suggests -- even if your remarks are just agreeing with, or adding a bit more information to, what someone else has said. Why? "The sooner you contribute, the less time you have to generate self-doubt," he says. "When you delay saying anything, it gets harder to break into the discussion."

**3. Choose a topic ahead of time.** Pick out one item on the agenda that's important to you and prepare in advance, so you'll be ready to chime in when the subject arises. As you get more accustomed to talking, you can do this with several topics, but starting with just one will build your confidence.

**4. Ask questions.** One of the easiest ways to get more comfortable with speaking is to ask others to elaborate on a point they've made that interests you. "By probing a little more deeply into someone else's comment, you'll feel engaged and become an active participant," Garfinkle says. You could even learn something new that might turn out to be important.

**5. Don't censor yourself.** "Commit beforehand to expressing at least one idea that pops into your head" at each meeting, he suggests, without second-guessing yourself or pausing while you edit what you'll say. Once this becomes a habit, Garfinkle says that "your ability to jump into a conversation without preparing first will overcome any lingering fears" of saying the wrong thing.

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**6. Recognize that disagreements are inevitable -- and useful.** Garfinkle cites research published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* that concluded that "even when [dissenting] points of view are wrong, they cause the rest of the group to think better, to create more solutions, and to improve the creativity of problem-solving." So don't hesitate to respectfully raise a different point of view.

**7. Don't give your power away.** "It's common in meetings to defer to a boss, others higher up in the organization, or someone who intimidates you," Garfinkle notes. "However, you may be giving your power away in the process. Senior executives will notice when someone -- especially a so-called underling -- stands firm with his or her own ideas. So look for opportunities to showcase your strengths and competencies."

Of course, all of this will take a bit of time and practice, especially since you're trying to change a long-entrenched habit of keeping your thoughts to yourself. But it's worth the effort. Not only will breaking your silence probably help your career, but, Garfinkle notes, "if you don't share your knowledge and opinions, you're really doing the meeting -- and the entire organization -- a disservice." Good luck!