



Say goodbye to shy

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He's one of the richest Canadians anywhere, he wrote the business plan for one of the world's most successful Internet companies, he's now involved in the highly aggressive movie business — and yet, he's shy. But Jeff Skoll, eBay's first president and now chairman and CEO of Los Angeles-based film production company Participant Productions, realized pretty early on, after moving to the United States in the summer of 1993, that his shyness wouldn't work for him. So he made a conscious effort to overcome it. "Not saying what you want to say, out of regard for politeness or sensitivity, doesn't seem to work as well here," says Skoll of his adopted country.

Like Skoll, many business people have had to come to terms with the reality that shyness can hurt their careers. After all, achieving success can be difficult when you can't bring yourself to answer the phone or to present an idea at a meeting. In order to thrive, you have to be able to demonstrate your true abilities at work. You may have the inside track on a major client and know deep inside that you have the potential to land that big account, for instance; but your co-workers are not mind readers, and unless you're able to articulate your strengths, you could be spinning your wheels. That's where effective communication comes in.

Shy people can have issues with speech due to a lack of confidence and a fear of being judged, says Bonnie Gross, a speech pathologist who, through her Toronto-based company, SpeechScience, has treated shy people for about 15 years. According to Gross, there are a host of traits that shy people possess — often without even knowing it. "They do things like avert their eyes," she explains. "They don't project, their voice is flat, they mumble, they stumble and they speak around the point." It can all affect the way co-workers perceive you. And your career could be in jeopardy if you don't act.

Gross says that shy people often undersell themselves, and that can limit job opportunities or promotions, because employers may think they are incapable of representing their company, either socially or in meetings, or are unable to speak up when necessary. Some of Gross's clients include people who can't move forward in their career due to shyness. "They stand up at a meeting, or they're giving a presentation, or they're on the phone, and they freeze," she says. "Or they're overlooked because, in a networking or a social environment in the office, they freeze."

But take heart, shy ones. There is hope — and you don't have to face a lifetime banishment to a back-corner cubicle. Consider the case of Rui Alves, a 35-year-old lawyer with WilsonChristen LLP, in Toronto. Alves suffered from some characteristics common to shy people, so he went to see Gross, partially at the suggestion of his boss. "I can recall a number of instances early on where I'd go to court and the audibility of my voice was a problem," says Alves, who focuses on family law and child advocacy.

Thanks to the particularly aggressive nature of the type of law he practises, Alves needed to portray himself as assertive, something he initially had difficulty with when applying for positions. While he's quite happy where he works now, Alves adds that he probably stayed at his last job, unhappily, for too long, in part due to his shyness. "If I was a bit more forthcoming, I might have been able to approach other people about other opportunities more easily," he says. It's been a year since Alves began to see Gross, and as a result, he says his clients and his colleagues have noticed a marked improvement in his interactions — and so has he.

Though a majority of shy people are aware of their temperament — and to varying degrees its impact — they may not realize its full power. Alves, for instance, knew he had public-speaking issues, but was unaware of his lack of eye contact until he began to see Gross. Social anxiety disorder, which can be described as extreme shyness, has become more prevalent in recent years, according to a 1999 study published in the industry journal *Eur Psychiatry*. Citing Statistics Canada numbers, John Walker, a clinical psychologist and director of the Anxiety Disorders Program at St. Boniface General Hospital, in Winnipeg, says that 3% of Canadians actually have social anxiety disorder, but most sufferers merely view themselves as shy. The way Walker sees it, shyness itself isn't a bad thing — unless it causes interference or distress in a person's life. At that point, it crosses over into problem territory. "Someone might be really quite shy, but if they're quite happy with their life, then you wouldn't call it a disorder," he says.

According to Gross, the shy ones who need help are those who have jobs where interaction with the public is critical yet they don't take steps to remedy the situation. "There are two ways that shyness presents itself: inwardly and outwardly," she says. "Usually they both go together, but there are people who are shy inside and they know that, and they know that it's negative, so they make an effort to be more assertive in the workplace."

The best way a manager with a shy employee can bring them out of their shell is to make an effort to get to know them better, Walker advises. "A lot of people are very inhibited by managers," he says. "If you make a point of being friendly and finding out a little bit about their life, they'll be much more able to approach you when they have a problem." And, he adds, if a shy individual is a key member of your team, you may want to consider the direct approach: talk about the issue and encourage them to work on tasks that will get them out and about, slowly. "Don't throw them in over their head," he warns.

One other thing to be especially aware of is how you position your conversation with a shy employee. Turn your suggestion that he or she work on their shyness into a positive, Gross suggests. "A manager could say, 'Maybe if you learn how to be a really good public speaker, we can enhance your job.'" Similar advice can be applied if your boss is the shy one. "Sometimes people misinterpret shyness as anger or aloofness," says Walker. "So if you've wondered about somebody like that, spending more time with them and seeing if you can get them to warm up is usually a good approach."

Since lack of good communication skills can sometimes be perceived as a hallmark of shyness, employees are well advised to rephrase what their boss has said in order to fully understand what's expected of them, Gross says. "Ask for clarification, but in a positive way, like 'Thank you, that's a really good suggestion. Let me just clarify, what you mean is...?'"

The good news is that if you're shy, you may already be a great listener, according to Walker, and you should use that to your advantage. "If a shy person can work on not avoiding social situations, but join in and be a good listener, and show an interest in other people, this characteristic will be valued," he adds. "Small talk is like oil on the wheels of a relationship. Once you put the oil on the wheels, when you have to deal with something more substantive, you already know the person and it's way easier."

If you consider yourself shy, and would like to get over it, Gross suggests that you begin by trying to make eye contact with your colleagues. Go out of your way to say "Good morning," and use their name. She also recommends that shy people offer genuine compliments to others, and practise in advance what they might say in situations that make them uncomfortable.

Such are the type of real-world scenarios that Gross runs through with her clients, after she analyzes what types of barriers to communication they face. For example, she offers concrete techniques for self-improvement in a course called Secrets of Confident Conversation. "It's all about not avoiding the problem and knowing how you're going to solve it," she says. "That's what really gives people confidence."

Walker highly recommends the Toastmasters' public speaking program, which offers communications skills workshops, and has clubs around the world, both in the community and at such companies as the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce and Ernst & Young. "They are very supportive, and very gradual," he says. "They teach people skills in terms of public speaking, but also in conducting a meeting."

All of these things can go a long way to helping shy people in their careers. And according to Gross, the nice thing about overcoming shyness is that "people don't have to change inside, they just have to change their outward behaviour." The result? "Suddenly they get this great reaction from other people — and they're just off to the races."