



Speak up to Accelerate Action

Together we can #AccelerateAction for gender equality.

This year, to pay homage to International Women's Day, Astraea's Lisa McCreath and Tanya Costello caught up with Emma Wainer, voice coach and founder at Speaking at Work. Emma is an expert in the voice; how it works physiologically, how it can be used to engage an audience and what a business needs to do strategically to promote powerful speaking. Emma works with a range of clients but has a particular focus on the female voice in business and professional services. We enjoyed discussing some key issues with Emma, as well as reflecting on Astraea's own commitment to gender equality in the workplace.

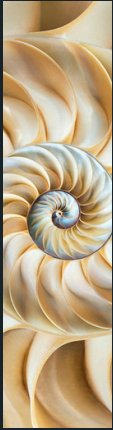
A conversation with Emma Wainer

Q: Have you experienced feeling unable to use your voice, or not being heard?



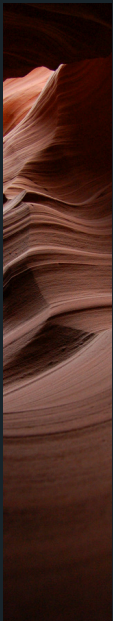
A: Like so many women, in my early career (as an NHS speech and language therapist and corporate trainer) I struggled with imposter syndrome. While I wasn't aware that's what it was at the time, I can look back on it now and acknowledge that is what was happening. When I went on maternity leave, my confidence leached away; I remember thinking my identity had changed, and my voice with it. While my experience stems from maternity leave, there are many things that can trigger this loss of communication confidence. Having been on this journey, I was motivated to start my consultancy business, Speaking at Work.

Q: When you started working with clients in the private sector, did you get a sense that people within organisations were underutilising or misusing their voices?



A: Definitely. With the best will in the world, many businesses have patriarchal structures which tend to affect the way women speak up at work. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the experiences of many women share common themes, with only the details being a little different. What I notice is many women exhibit 'quiet competence,' showcasing their readiness for promotions or new challenges through diligent work and often perfectionism, rather than by vocalising their potential. This can lead to being overlooked for stretch work and leadership roles, and ultimately can lead to career stagnation.

Q: In your opinion, what is it about women that makes them more hesitant to speak up and how can we overcome these barriers?

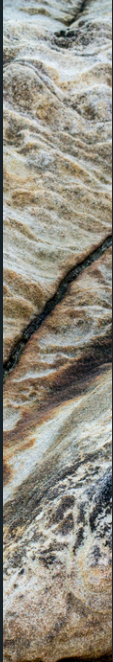


A: Women are conditioned from a young age to get it right rather than take a risk and perhaps get it wrong. For women in law, there is a tendency to delay speaking up until they have perfected their point. Quite often, this causes them to miss opportunities.

I try and encourage my clients to lean into the concept of “perceived competence”. How we show up, use our bodies and breathe all demonstrates how “good” we might be. Now, there is no correlation between being good at your job and being a confident speaker, but every human has this connection in their brains. Internal meetings can be an incredible opportunity to build that perceived competence. If women use that platform to speak up, they may start to feel that they are being seen.



Q: What can organisations do to create an environment where women and men can feel safe and empowered to use their voices?



A: I think interruptions are an important topic. The organisation and people on the team need to be alive to interruptions. Research shows that where there are no women at a meeting, interruptions become more prominent. Where there is only one woman in the meeting, she will often struggle to get airtime, be interrupted regularly, and her ideas may be put to one side.

I have seen organisations implement a no interruption policy. There is also real power in having allies in a room. When we are interrupted, we will naturally become a little defensive and can change, vocally and physically. It can be much easier for an ally to step in and say, “actually, I do not think they were quite finished”. I think policy is a good step, but it is everyone’s job to stand up for one another and coaching (where someone observes the team in a meeting) can be eye-opening.

Q: What kind of support might organisations need to make sure individual contributions are valued equally and acknowledged?



A: It is nobody’s fault these barriers are in place; they just exist. They exist whether we are focused on gender or wider diversity concerns. To truly support employees, in my opinion, there needs to be:

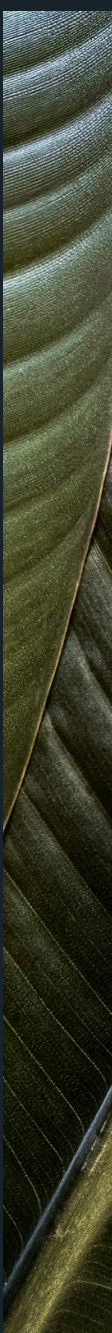
1. A top-down and bottom-up approach. Policies are a tool for the organisation to facilitate discussions, for example, around flexible working, but this works best when training and awareness is provided as well.
2. Actively support women before, during and after prolonged periods of leave. It is during these periods that we see so many women giving away their agency accidentally. Teaching these women earlier to use their voice in a powerful way gives them more tools to control what happens – at least in the workplace.





When these two strategies work together it is brilliant. When they do not, businesses risk losing highly qualified and effective staff, ultimately affecting their bottom line.

Q: What advice would you give to the legal and professional services sector to accelerate action and facilitate speaking up?



A: There is no one thing that is going to overcome these barriers, but the strategies I have mentioned of a top-down and bottom-up approach, coupled with actively supporting women during periods we know are generally difficult, can be an excellent way to try and accelerate action. Putting policies in place creates a space for discussion, for example:

1. Mentorship: I find that many partners or people in senior positions are confident that with training and policies in place they will break down the systematic barriers. I think this is wishful thinking, but mentoring can provide a more balanced view because it works both ways. For women, I think having a “femtor” can be impactful because the mentor is someone who has managed to progress and thrive and is actively working to do the same.

2. Maternity policies including return to work plans: I have worked with an organisation that built into their maternity and parental leave policies a requirement that returners receive active support. For example, we tend to see that the first three months after returning from of maternity leave are difficult, and then at the six month point some women hit a real low. That is when are you start to see women drift off. Conversely, when women have actively been supported and coached through that six-to-nine-month period it can result in a massive acceleration in productivity, even resulting in higher fee earning than before.

This support can be put in place by the policies. If these affect an organisation’s bottom line and improve client satisfaction, I suspect we will also see a shift in culture.





Accelerating change at Astraea

Astraea, recently recognised at the *Women & Diversity in Law* awards, was founded on the idea that to attract and retain the best people, our business needs to be able to meet individual needs which can fluctuate and change. Astraea has been an employer of choice for many women (and men) returning to work after prolonged absence or for those trying to better balance caring responsibilities. You can access our previous commentary [here](#).

In 2025 we have made the following positive steps to accelerate change:

1. A wholesale review of our current maternity and paternity policies with enhanced paid leave to better support our new parents in the team;
2. The introduction of an enhanced adoption leave policy;
3. A review of our equality policy to record the Firm's ethos of considering individual needs to better facilitate conversations (at all levels) about changes to employment terms including flexible working; and
4. The introduction of presentation training as part of our broader internal training programme.

In addition, Astraea has offered mentorship and support to individuals interested in a *career in law*. As we reflect on our conversation with Emma, and Astraea's steady growth at partner and associate level, we continue to consider how we can further accelerate action as a business and within the professional services market.

There is more work to do. Let's all focus on accelerating those actions.





Emma Wainer

Emma Wainer is a communication expert and executive speaker coach. Her company, Speaking At Work delivers transformational workshops and coaching designed to help women communicate with clarity, credibility, and authenticity - whether in boardrooms, on stage, or in high-stakes business conversations. Through a strategic mix of mindset, messaging, and delivery techniques, Emma empowers her clients to own their space, engage their audience, and drive business growth through the power of their voice.

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