

1 Make Strong First Impressions

If you've ever sat there, sweating in a blazer, while people lob difficult questions at you, *you get it*. Those special things called job interviews are just one example of the first impressions that can feel “make-or-break” in your career. How is it that so much can ride on other peoples' 30- or 60-minute assessment of you as a human being? And how can a simple Q&A have such a disproportionate impact on your bank account, résumé, and future? We job candidates have our own power and agency (like the ability to walk away or not apply in the first place), but it's easy at moments like this to feel like *they have all the power*.

It's no wonder that situations like this make our heads spin with tension! In so many career moments, you *are* being sized up by others in a matter of minutes. But what makes this even trickier is that the rules are ambiguous: at a networking event, for example, we're told to present ourselves in an assured, confident way—but at the same time, we shouldn't come off as over-rehearsed or like a try-hard. And in pursuing a new role, just because we may want a

job, we shouldn't convey that we *need* the job. Then, on our first day of a new job, we should make sure to dress in a smart, polished way, but we're cautioned about looking overly formal or out of touch. Talk about mixed messages!

The human need to search for acceptance from others, even early on in an interaction, is real. We evolved in such a way that sharing resources with other members of our group led to stronger social bonds and helped a group's chances of survival. Part of *today's* challenge comes from the fact that meeting new people means negotiating lots of unknowns. As NYU researchers explain it, each new person we meet is "a source of ambiguous and complex information."¹ It's sitting with that ambiguity, along with our compulsion to be accepted, that can push and pull our confidence levels like warm taffy. As we try to find that ideal, Goldilocks level of confidence in first-time interactions—not too much and not too little—we can end up forgetting to bring our actual, full, living, breathing selves with us. Not just in interviews, but in any meaningful first-time interaction—introducing ourselves to a prospect, meeting our new boss, or at a coffee date with someone who has the job we dream of having.

This happened to me right at a time when I was trying to cement an important consulting assignment and build up my business. I had done a small job for a mid-sized tech company—helping to launch a new employee resource group. I now had the chance to pitch a bigger, more powerful leadership and inclusion project to the CEO and his team. In that meeting with the CEO, I worked so hard on making my first impression memorable that I practically tried to fill that vast, gray conference room with my years of knowledge! Armed with my 64 slides, I was so caught up in a gust of "experting," I didn't leave many openings and

spaces for his questions or comments. And slowly, I watched him kind of pull away from the conversation, literally backing his chair away from the table. As he did, my own negative self-talk went into overdrive—which caused me to give a particularly incoherent response to the single question he *was able* to ask! It hurts to admit, but as you probably can guess, I failed that day to both impress and make an impact.

Yes, it stung. But I can see more clearly now that any situation where you're driven by your insecurities and leading in someone else's style—not yours—will put you closer to losing your audience. Maybe you can relate? Have you ever played a false part initially—or watered yourself down to give others what you *thought* they wanted?

Part of the issue here is that we pressurize first impressions so much. After all—as undoubtedly you've heard—you never have a second chance to make a first impression, right? In the span of time it takes to bake brownies, we should somehow neatly downplay our flaws and peccadillos and showcase only our shiniest, most motivated, brilliant self.

Here's the thing. So many of the common narratives around making great first impressions are packed with covering up who you really are—and by extension, shaming the not-presentable parts. Well, I'm here to tell you that doesn't work. You do not need to pull one over on people to make it. And to think you should only hurts your confidence long term.

Drawing from my own lessons and from coaching and training thousands of leaders along the way, I'll illustrate how to show *all the way up* in these meaningful moments—get ready for it—*as yourself*. Whether you're trying to make a strong initial impression at a networking event—or on your first day at work, at college, or with a new client—you can do this best *as you*. And I can't wait to show you how.

Just Do You

So, let's update the mindset you're working with. Let's embrace a little thing called human, authentic first impressions. As we do, I hope you'll give yourself and others some latitude. Because who among us doesn't have "off" days and moments? Or doesn't stumble, stammer, or feel plain weird, sometimes, socially speaking?

While you're at it, make some room for the possibility that if things don't go just perfectly, the situation isn't chiseled permanently in marble. In fact, right now, cozy up to the idea that if you need to, you can deepen your existing impressions and relationships with people, even ask for a redo or strategize a comeback. And if for some reason you can't do those things, you know what? You'll learn that's survivable too.



Adopt Dog Code

Sometimes the best confidence lessons come from the most unlikely places. Here's a case in point: Have you ever noticed how dogs greet us humans? If they're anything like my Newfoundland pup Midnight, they don't hesitate. They don't overthink it. They don't talk it over with their friends before making a move.

A dog's nature is to be the *first* to make a connection. To come right up to you and greet you. And I think there's an important confidence insight we can take from that.

After navigating a pandemic, we're all acutely aware of the importance of something scientists call "Vitamin S."² The need to bring people together socially, whether virtually or in person, and to feel a sense of togetherness.

In fact, scientists have discovered even *very subtle* interactions with strangers improved well-being!³ For example, in experimental studies where subjects were instructed to greet, smile, or initiate a very brief conversation—a *single* encounter—the interaction boosted people’s happiness. These little moments included interacting with a bus driver, with fellow commuters on a bus or train, and with a barista at a coffee shop—even or being with a fellow participant waiting to take part in an experiment. Here’s what’s cool: the short-term boost in happiness occurs not only in the person initiating the conversation, but also in the person whose social contact was sought!⁴

So how about it? Why not be the first to:

- Say hi and introduce yourself in a group?
- Invite your new colleague to a networking or learning session you’re attending?
- Notice someone who’s isolated and might appreciate an invitation to join you?
- Invite your new coworker to lunch?
- Be warm and welcoming to an employee your team’s had a less-than-great relationship with in the past?

As you adopt “dog code,” you may need to be courageous. Sometimes it feels vulnerable to be *the first*. If you’re more introverted or reserved, it might feel challenging to “go right up” to perfect strangers and start speaking. *But you can still do it.* You might also need courage to challenge the culture of your organization or team—especially if being friendly or “being the first” is not the norm. It takes nerve to buck the status quo! But when you proactively welcome others, you show humility, curiosity, bravery, and a collaborative mindset. These are some of the best traits of true leaders.

Dog code won't just raise up your confidence levels, it's a way to override similarity bias too. Also called "mini-me syndrome," this cognitive bias explains our tendency to gravitate to people who look and think like us⁵—which of course narrows our world, our thinking, and our connections. When we adopt dog code, we get that much closer to halting bias and preferential treatment. To make this happen, we *all* must contribute to positive, welcoming environments and make inclusive first impressions a real thing.

Being the first is a great way to build confidence around other people. When you do, you make relationships a priority in your life—and the people around you will notice and remember.



Connect, Then Lead

Have you ever felt a kind of nibbling pressure to demonstrate you were smart? You know, to show people that you *know things*? I know I've been there—and my bullish performance in front of the CEO is a fitting example. When the stakes feel high, we tend to want to prove our strength first and above all else.

But here's a newsflash: That's exactly the wrong tack to use when we want to make a strong first impression!

In a study by Dr. Amy Cuddy at Harvard University,⁶ she found that employees prefer leaders to show warmth first and demonstrate competence second. To get a little more granular here, warmth is represented by things such as friendliness, kindness, and politeness; competence is shown through ability, intelligence, and skills. As Dr. Cuddy explains, once an individual gets a read on a target's

warmth, the individual uses those judgments to decide how to behave toward the target.

I like to think about it like this: being friendly and warm is like a door that opens up more possibilities—it puts other people at ease and opens their ears to hear what you have to say next. On the flip side, low warmth is an inhibitor. Even if you're highly competent, your likeability and trustworthiness are what drive others' partnership, followership, and willingness to vouch for you. A Zenger Folkman study⁷ that looked at 50,000 managers found that “if you're seen as low-warmth, you have something like a one-in-2000 chance to make the top quartile of effectiveness as a leader.”

So how do we demonstrate this kind of warmth, in a clear and compelling way? Here are some sign posts!

Physical indicators
of warmth:

- Hold steady, engaged eye contact 60–70% of the time
- Nod to show you understand
- Smile to signal you're welcoming and bringing positive energy
- Lean in, slightly, to show you're interested and engaged in an idea or to encourage the other person

Verbal indicators
of warmth:

- Ask follow-up questions as a way to show interest in the speaker's thoughts and feelings
 - Express empathy, as in “I imagine that's a lot to manage/cover/deal with. . .”
 - Make your early statements positive, rather than about your long flight or bad night's sleep
 - Give sincere compliments
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I can still remember my mentor telling me when I was in business school that the best way to be interesting is to be *interested*. And the more I interact with people, the more that phrase resonates. Friendliness and warmth are a form of showing interest. We feel it, in an instinctual way, when someone behaves in a friendly, “I want to get to know you” way. So remember, next time you want to make a firm impression in someone’s mind, prioritize your connection with them ahead of dazzling them with your brilliance. Once you establish warmth, the strength of your hard skills is a welcome gift, not a threat.



Give a Great Intro

When someone starts a meeting with, “Let’s do a round of intros,” is your honest reaction ever to cringe? Even though you could talk about your work or industry for 30 minutes straight?

The funny thing is that even the most knowledgeable professional, with a respectable number of years under their belt, can feel anxious about nailing their intro. Why is this? Here are the three most common trip wires I see:

1. **Pressure:** Too often, we feel the crushing expectation that we should absolutely nail our intro—or showcase every single facet of our value. I’m here to tell you to relax a little bit. Stop trying to fit it all in. If you’re meeting a new coworker, for example, it’s perfectly okay to give them a broad intro but to leave a little bit of intrigue.
2. **Improvising:** Don’t just wing it. When it comes to your intro, writing down two or three clear sentences about your role, until it’s firmly etched in your mind,

can help you deliver it in a cleaner, more self-assured way. Stand-up comedians are allowed to commit their best lines to memory—why can't we?

3. **Drudgery:** If you hate giving your intro, it shows. But if you watch people who do this well, they willingly “take the baton” of power in the situation. They enjoy sharing. They don't behave as though their intro is a frivolous waste of time or an indulgence. So think about an enjoyable element of your work—for example, what gives you pride in your role—and start there. Casey Erin Clark, a talented speaker, coach, and friend, even recommends imparting a pleasant flavor to your name—and to imagine tasting it as you give your intro, so you're sure to enjoy it!

To find the right words, Paola Pascual of Talaera, an international firm focused on teaching business English, offers a great framework for making a clean intro: Adapted from⁸.

The three simple elements are:

1. Name
2. Title
3. Translating your impact into simple, nontechnical language

The third step is the most important. It allows people to digest your message (especially if they're not in your role, company, or function) and to see you as more than just a jumble of #corporatespeak. When you get ready to share your impact in step 3, some of

the verbal connectors you can use include: “But really, I . . .,” “It’s all about. . .,” or “. . . Which is a fancy way of saying . . .”

This sounds like:

- I’m Trevor Miller. I’m director of operations, which is a fancy way of saying that I make sure that the company is run in the most efficient way possible.
- I’m Neil Singh. I’m a talent acquisition manager. I find, recruit, and hire great candidates. It’s all about making sure the team keeps growing nicely.
- I’m a Dierdre Jones, I’m a social media manager and oversee content strategy for our three biggest retail clients. But really, I help companies tell compelling stories about their brands.

See how this adds simplicity *and* authenticity? I encourage you to practice with a partner, friend, family member—even your doggy. If all that fails, try it in the mirror! Next time someone claps and says, “Let’s do a round of intros,” take a nice breath before you give yours, smile sincerely, and enjoy sharing.



Meet People Where They Are

There’s a classic social worker saying I learned on the first day of my master’s program: “Meet people where they are.” The idea is that to engage any person, we need to start by

observing where they are now—and to align with that, without judgment. That's the opposite of telling them how and where to be—or to convey in some way they're too slow or uninteresting, not operating like we do, or not meeting our expectations.

Here's what's cool about this concept: our bodies confirm better than any other part of us whether we're willing to meet someone where they are. Make a great first impression with these three techniques:

- **Turn toward them, fully.** You've likely been there before, and so have I: You're speaking to someone and you're engaged in the conversation—but only part of their body is turned to you. They may be swiveling their eyes, head, and neck to look elsewhere, or maybe their torso is twisting in another direction, or maybe their feet are pointed elsewhere. I'll tell you what: It feels lousy to be the person getting sparse attention. When giving divided attention in this way, it tells others you're not engaged and may be looking for a quick exit from the conversation. To avoid these moments, make a point to have your body “squared” to the individual who's speaking. That means from your face—to your torso—to your toes—you're fully facing them.
- **If you're seated, rise to greet a person.** Let's say you're sitting in a restaurant waiting for your mentor to arrive. As they approach the table, you have a few choices. You could verbally greet 'em while seated or shake their hand as you remain seated and they hover above you. Here's a better approach: When you're meeting in person, and particularly if a new person walks into the room, stand up to greet them. When you do this, you're signaling respect and basic acknowledgment of them.

That also helps you engage them on an equal level—eye to eye. That’s important because sometimes sitting can come off as being passive or meek.

- **Match people’s speed.** If for example, you’re talking and walking with someone in the direction of the buffet at a networking event, try to align your walking speed with theirs. (Many restaurant hosts and hostesses are taught to do this, guiding you to your table *at your speed* rather than leaving you in the dust!) When you do this, you’re being observant of their style and aligning with where they are. This might seem like a minor attending skill but the impact is major. Similarly, if they’re communicating in a way that reveals they’re a slower talker, they probably won’t appreciate a volley of 15 rapid-fire questions. Notice their pace and try, in little ways, to respect it.

When you meet people where they are, it’s like you’re saying, “I see you, *and* I respect you as you are.” People may not know the principle you’re using, but they’ll know you care and you fully showed up.



Start from the Inside Out

Your inner voice—your self-dialogue—is a funny thing. It can distort your weaknesses, amplifying your worst fears. Or it can support and encourage you, powering some of your biggest breakthroughs.

While most of us think of a first impression as something that manifests outwardly—it really starts with what we’re saying inside. To help clients start to embed

empowering beliefs in their minds, I have them repeat short sound bites, or mantras, over time. The great thing about mantras is that they really can become our new default programming like a new channel we're tuned into, mentally. And research suggests that affirmations can help you improve problem-solving under stress.⁹

So invest even a few minutes of time before your next “first impression” contemplating the new and improved qualities you're developing. You can practice reciting—and really internalizing these four messages:

1. **“I earned my place here.”** When we feel we're on equal footing—just as entitled to be in the room and at the meeting table as others—we authorize ourselves to have a voice. Without this foundation though, we might undercut our words or backstep what we just said. So say with pride and even more emphasis if you need to, *“I totally earned my place here!”*
2. **“I take bold action in spite of fear.”** Fear is not an omen that something terrible is sure to happen to you. It's normal and even something you can learn to shrug at. See your fear as a well-meaning but overprotective parent. And then challenge yourself to think and act big in spite of it.
3. **“If I take a wrong turn, I can right myself.”** Sometimes it's not the challenge itself that's terrifying, it's the idea of recovering from failure. Well, here's a different way to look at it: Did you know cats have a “righting reflex” that allows them to orient themselves, no matter how thrown they are, so that they land on their feet? The same is true for you. If you're thrown off course, you have a ready set of skills, experiences, and instincts to help you rebalance.

4. **“If it’s meant to be, it’s up to me.”** You are the number one agent of change in your career and life. Your own self-directed action is most potent. So don’t wait for someone else. Claim that up-for-grabs power that’s sitting on the table!

Remember, if your compassion doesn’t include yourself, it’s incomplete. Reprogramming your inner mind with empowering, motivating statements is one of the best gifts you can give yourself. It reminds of what you value about yourself and helps you focus on what you can control. And it helps you create the kind of supportive inner environment that unleashes your success. Not once in a while, but as your resting state.



Be the Expert on Your Audience

Think of someone you’ve seen who made a great initial impression with a group they were convening or presenting to. They probably prepared mentally. The person probably knew their facts. But here’s something extra-extra I bet they did: They spoke to the conversation the audience members were having in their own minds!

When you can peer into the minds of your audience before a networking session, presentation, or meeting, it shows. Your connection with the audience will strengthen. And you’ll exude credibility and confidence.

So how do you deliver compelling and memorable messages by aligning with your audience’s thinking? Try asking and answering these three questions ahead of time:

1. **The first question to ask yourself about your audience is: What are their main goals?** What are the

basics they're in charge of? This work is often at the forefront of their minds. Let's say you're presenting to the marketing department, a group that works on building awareness, engaging customers, and designing promotional activities—now, you can tailor bits of your conversation to acknowledge that. By dropping in these details, it strengthens your bond and trust with the audience.

2. **The second question to ask yourself about your audience is: What are they craving?** What is it they're particularly passionate about or hungry for right now? Sticking with our last example, let's say the marketing department is heavily fixated on competitor activity at the moment. By integrating terms related to competition into your conversations—such as “competitive advantage,” “gaining an edge,” or “beating out rivals”—it links you to the audience. They feel like you know the most pressing aspects of their world.
3. **The third question to ask yourself about your audience is: What are their pain points?** What obstacles are front and center for them? For most marketing departments, generating traffic and leads is a common, ongoing challenge. You might not have the cure to their problem, but even acknowledging their “pain” can boost your credibility in their eyes. You can highlight one of your own challenges, then relate it to one you know they have, like an ally would do.

If you don't know your audience's goals, cravings, and pain points—be creative. Interview a colleague who does know. Research corporate websites, press releases, even open job descriptions to understand what a particular group most needs at the moment.

When you empathize with someone else early on, you see the world more like they see it. You don't force your way on them. And that cements a positive first impression. In the words of computer scientist Alan Kay, "A change of perspective is worth 80 IQ points."



Harness Halloween Confidence

People often comment on the brightly colored clothes I regularly wear. Now, it's not that I want to be seen from outer space—or take out your retinas. It's that bright colors make me feel energized, confident, emboldened, and engaged!

Just like me, your appearance tells a story. And that story doesn't just influence others: it influences how you see yourself. In one of my favorite studies,¹⁰ conducted at Northwestern University, researchers found that students did better on tests that measured attention span and accuracy when they wore a white lab coat. The lab coat, which symbolizes care and attentiveness in the world of medicine and science, actually elevated the student's efforts. Wow! Subjects "embodied" the traits of the outfit they were wearing and were even more engaged and better at concentrating in tests.

Suddenly, I can appreciate why my Wonder Woman Halloween costume as an eight-year-old felt so awesome—and so real. My outfit didn't feel like "dress-up" or a costume; in it, I felt like the best version of me. Think about how you felt as a kid on Halloween: Did you have a favorite costume? How did it make you feel? Did it change how you walked, how you spoke (even as you asked for candy)?

Now, what can we learn from this? We already take on personas all the time—we already “play the part.” The question is: how about proactively picking more positive personas with our clothing choices so that we feel our best and control *how we show up*?

So I want to know, what clothes make you feel most confident and engaged? For me, this means creating power outfits—ensembles that make me feel awesome! Here are two surefire steps for how you can build your own!

Step 1: Start by remembering a time when you wore something in a work setting and felt great. Maybe it’s a relaxed shirt in a calming tone, or a bold pattern that people always comment on. It’s the fit or cut that feels “just right.” Remember, what works for me will very well be different than what works for you. Alright, have you got it? Great.

Step 2: Now, I want you to try to identify and replicate that “feel-great” premise. Let’s say what makes you feel best is a simple, well-cut, dark-colored trouser with a quietly patterned top. How could you create five or six iterations—combinations—of that look? If it sounds simple, it’s because it is.

Whether your power outfits become your daily uniform or are reserved for big moments is up to you. I’m not going to tell you what’s right or wrong. Instead, I’m going to say this: you get to decide. And what you decide to wear will affect how you feel. If you feel authentically *you* in your clothes, you’ll bring that originality to work. Your confidence can come through in your conversations. Your presence and first impressions can change.

Experiment tomorrow with wearing those clothes and see if it changes how you feel.



Make Memorable Virtual First Impressions

Did you know people have 250% more meetings every day than they did before the pandemic?¹¹ Shocking, right? But just because we have more meetings, doesn't mean they're easier to negotiate.

That's especially true for virtual meetings.

When we lose some of our human signals in virtual settings, it can lead to more misunderstandings or ambiguity, and it can make us less sure of how and when to insert ourselves into the conversation. If you can relate to feeling this way, you're so not alone!

Here's the great news. You don't need to be a Zoom maestro, tech expert, or shapeshifter to handle virtual meetings and first impressions with aplomb.

Use these two go-tos the next time you want to start on the right foot in a virtual meeting:

1. **Introduce yourself early:**

According to the primacy effect,¹² humans have a tendency to remember better those things presented at the beginning of a sequence (compared to say, the middle). So, if you want to be remembered, think strategically about what you say early on. This can be as simply as saying, "Hi, it's Sharma Elliot, good to see everyone!"

Not just that, speaking up and introducing yourself or your contribution in the meeting quickly breaks a seal. It tells people (including you) that you're here, you have something to say, and you should be listened to. I find this "early gains" effect is amplified when I arrive

a few minutes early and engage in small talk with folks as the meeting is getting going. It tells your brain, “I’ve already spoken so doing it more is NBD (no big deal).”

2. Shoot for at least three interjections:

Now, it’s awesome that you piped up early with an intro. But there’s one more thing you need to do. To make a strong virtual impression, you need to grab hold of the entire “impression time window” available to you. So challenge yourself to contribute three times. If you’re a subject matter expert or otherwise have lots to say, no need to stop there. But to hit your goal of three, you can speak up by building off someone else’s idea: “What I’m hearing from Carlos is X, and what’s striking about that is. . .,” synthesize different ideas: “I see points A and B as related, and that matters because. . .,” or make a new connection: “This is sparking ABC idea, and I think we should take a look at it . . .”

These contributions can help you be seen and heard—even in spaces that are harder to navigate. Commit to these habits, and don’t be afraid to take it one step further—share with at least one of your teammates your goal to show up in virtual spaces. Then encourage them to act as an accountability buddy.



Be Ready for Opportunities

Most of us can think of someone who gets amazing opportunities—it’s like no matter what they do or wherever they show up, good fortune just seems to fall in their lap.

How irritating, right? Especially if you feel like you’re stuck in a spiral of bad luck.

Well, I'm willing to bet that the "luckiest" person in your life is a doer, not a hoper. Someone who's ready, even when making a first impression, to seize on a moment.

Think about it: juicy moments are everywhere—meeting someone from a cool company and inquiring if they're hiring, telling someone about your ambition, or asking to be part of a committee you just learned about. So how can you maximize these moments, rather than freeze up?

- **Be a giver.** In Dorie Clark's book *Stand Out*, she shares that lucky people are willing to approach others *without* expecting anything in return. Coming from a place of generosity with your network—rather than focusing on “what's in it for me?”—can create tons of goodwill, and, well, opportunities! Even in a first meeting, a willingness to send people valuable resources, to react compassionately to their circumstances, and to make needed introductions can go a long way. So give to your network as you make early impressions and watch as opportunities shine upon *you*.
- **Grab moments before the window closes.** There is a beautiful concept from ancient Greece called *kairos* (or *καῖρός*)—it means “the right, critical, or opportune moment.” In the space of one little breath, you can make a pivot or a move that changes everything. Lucky people are prone to grab those moments and find the opportunity in them—to act! Let's say you have one shot with an influential executive at your company. You're going to an event where they'll be, and you want to share your big new idea with them. This is the time to act (not overthink). So remember, an important

piece of “luck” is a willingness to take bold action—to grab hold of the moment—in a timely way.

- **Change up your routines.** Over the longer term, this habit can create new experiences and widen your net of opportunities and connections. Check out a new coffee shop, take a different route to work, or go to a different networking event. These small changes can alter the people whose paths you cross and, by extension, your opportunities.

Have you ever changed your life and opportunities with one small decision? Have you ever made a bold first impression simply by being ready? Experiment with these tips to grab more of them.

