Finding my voice

My mind was racing as I watched the conference speaker present her data. I would have expected a different result, and I was eager to ask how she reached her conclusions and learn what subtle details I missed. When she finished her talk and the session chair opened the floor to questions, my hand shot up. For me, this was an achievement. Just a few years prior, speaking up in a lecture hall full of unfamiliar people would have been unthinkable.

I started stuttering when I was 10, spurred by my parents’ divorce. For much of my life I worried about drawing attention to my impediment. As a result, I lost a great deal of confidence when speaking, especially in unfamiliar situations. Science seemed a refuge. I enjoyed it, and I assumed that research is done in solitude and requires little communication with others. But I quickly learned that being part of a research team requires constant interactions with colleagues. Hardly a job for someone afraid to talk!

During my Ph.D., I faced these challenges as best I could. I meticulously prepared for every meeting with my adviser, trying to always arrive with more answers than problems. I practiced every talk I had to deliver over and over until I could be sure I would not have to think about the contents when presenting. During group meetings, where colleagues already knew about my stutter, I learned to speak up, asking questions, suggesting new ideas, and expressing my opinions.

But in a larger audience, such as a departmental seminar or conference, I kept quiet. If I had a question during a talk, I would wait to ask the speaker privately or—more often than not—keep my queries to myself. Over time, I stopped even thinking about questions. I absorbed the ideas, technical details, and data presented, but rarely thought about the research and how it might relate to what I know or work on.

This all changed when I got an opportunity to organize a seminar series. I had moved to a new institution, which did not have a departmental seminar at the time. I found I missed the chance to learn about others’ work. I suggested starting a seminar series to some supportive colleagues, we found funds to support a few events, and suddenly I was inviting potential speakers and planning their visits. I soon realized I could not just sit back and listen as before. Moderating the posttalk discussion would fall to me. I had to have a few questions ready to kick off the Q&A.

I worried my stutter might trip me up in front of more senior colleagues, with whom I was still trying to establish my credentials and credibility. I managed to push that concern aside and accept the responsibility that came with this new effort I had spearheaded. But I had held back for so long that I had a hard time even formulating my questions.

The first few talks were quite stressful, as I learned to balance listening with mulling over every possible question that came to my mind. Questions that connected the seminar topic to my own research appealed to me but might be too specific to engage the rest of the audience. More general questions might help Ph.D. students and junior postdocs better understand some of the concepts discussed. But were they too basic, suggesting I had not been listening? I could ask about the methodology, but the following exchange might slip into jargon few people would understand.

Despite my uncertainty, I forced myself out of my comfort zone and asked the questions that occurred to me. Sometimes I stuttered. Sometimes the questions didn’t hit the sweet spot I was aiming for. But as I got more practice week after week, I discovered the benefits went far beyond being a good host. I found myself listening more attentively and thinking more deeply. The changes were subtle at first, like noticing small details I would have missed before. But soon I started to draw inspiration for solving problems in my research I didn’t know how to tackle.

In the end, I found the courage to ask questions in front of large audiences—including at conferences and other events beyond our departmental seminar series. I still hesitate sometimes, and I carefully choose my words to hide my stutter. But I know that confronting my fears has helped me become a better researcher.

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