

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2004 - VOL. CCXLIV NO. 67 - ★★ ★ \$1.00

MANAGING YOUR CAREER

By JOANN S. LUBLIN

To Win Advancement, You Need to Clean Up Any Bad Speech Habits

THREE MONTHS AFTER she joined an information company in January 2002, 23-year-old Kristy Pinand moved up to producer from production assistant.

The promotion was, like, so cool. But Ms. Pinand's routine use of such "teen speak" bothered her boss. "She sounded very young," potentially hurting her ability to win clients' respect, recalls Collette Liantonio, president of Concepts TV Productions in Boonton, N.J. She urged the youthful-looking staffer to watch her words.

Ms. Pinand, who still gets mistaken for a teenager, heeded the constructive criticism. She now rehearses her remarks aloud before she calls a client. "How you talk should not be how you're judged, but of course it is," she observes.

Whether you sound like an adolescent, curse at colleagues, talk tentatively or exhibit an abrasive Brooklyn accent, you risk derailing your career because you appear unpolished.

Humphrey S. Tyler, president of National Trade Publications in Latham, N.Y., frequently rejects sales and editorial

candidates because they exhibit grammatically incorrect speech. "It's as if they pulled out a baseball cap and put it on backward," the publisher complains. "It simply reflects a low level of professionalism."

THE WELL-EDUCATED controller of a Chicago company has long aspired to become a chief financial officer elsewhere. But recruiter Laurie Kahn refuses to recommend him because he often says "me and so-and-so," followed by the wrong verb form. "I don't know how much he'll be able to advance," says Ms. Kahn, president of Media Staffing Network in Chicago.

A General Electric unit hesitated to elevate a Massachusetts plant manager to a higher-paid corporate spot five years ago because "every other word he said in the plant was the f-word," recalls Laurie Schloff, director of executive coaching at Speech Improvement Co. in Boston. GE warned that he wouldn't get his promotion unless he cleaned up his foul mouth, then tapped her to assist him for eight weeks. "His coaching went very fast because he tended not to use curses around females," Ms. Schloff says. Among other things, she taught the manager to avoid slang and employ more formal language during meetings. He won the coveted transfer.

A growing number of businesses retain speech coaches for rising stars with speech flaws. This assistance typically costs a company between \$250 and \$400 an hour. A coach analyzes an individual's discourse, pinpoints shortcomings and videotapes each session. Clients take the tapes home and do daily drills in front of a mirror.

Earlier this year, a suburban New Jersey health-care company hired speech-coach Diane DiResta to counsel a 43-year-old middle manager whose tentative communication style was hindering her mobility. The manager regularly employed "wimpy" words such as "I think." She also engaged in "uptalk," a singsong pattern in which declarative sentences end with a rising inflection. Bosses and mentors said "that I needed to be more confident when I spoke," she recalls.

After her first five sessions with Ms. DiResta, president of DiResta Communications in Staten Island, N.Y., the woman already sees benefits. "I'm becoming a lot more comfortable about speaking," she reports. She reinforces her speech training by audiotaping herself before important meetings. "If I sound tentative, I adjust that," she explains.

And "her boss notices that she's more assertive in business meetings," adds Ms. DiResta, who is also a speech pathologist. "There are fewer wimpy words."

A SENIOR PROJECT manager at a major financial-services company was surprised when his supervisor blamed his stalled career trajectory partly on his thick Brooklyn accent. Despite his M.B.A., he was speaking too fast and skipping many consonants; his "deez" and "doze" made him sound uneducated and inarticulate.

"Some words didn't come out the way they should," the 46-year-old Brooklyn native admits. "People will draw conclusions about your leadership abilities based on how things are expressed."

The man's employer covered the \$5,000 tab for 14 sessions ending in March 2003 with New York coach Laura Darius, founder of Darius Communications. The project manager later assumed a wider role that requires constant interaction with senior executives. He believes his communication ability has improved so much that he will soon become a managing director.

What should you do if you suspect your speaking habits are retarding your professional progress—but management doesn't offer a speech coach?

Seek frequent feedback about your communication competency from your boss, both informally and during performance reviews, suggests Joshua Ehrlich, dean of a master's program in executive coaching sponsored by BeamPines, a New York human-resources consultancy, and Middlesex University in London.

Feedback helped cure Ms. Pinand, the information producer. When she slipped into teen speak during shoots, Ms. Liantonio "would give me a look that said, 'There, you are doing it again.'" In July, the young woman became the company's production director.

E-mail comments to me at joann.lublin@wsj.com. To see other recent *Managing Your Career* columns, please go to CareerJournal.com.



Jack Gallagher