



# Stop Pushing Me Around!

A Workplace Guide for the Timid, Shy, and Less Assertive

by Ilise Benun  
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## Take-Aways

- Shyness is a habit. You can break it by choosing to act differently.
- Being curious about others and the world around you will trump your timidity.
- If you fully envision your fears, you'll soon see that they have little basis in reality.
- The starting point for all conversations is small talk – a learnable skill.
- Prepare some standard opening phrases that explain what you do.
- To engage in conversation, listen closely to others. Ask questions and follow up on answers.
- When speaking at important meetings, imagine that you are addressing a circle of friends.
- Nothing will boost your self-confidence more than being prepared.
- To shape your presentations, find out what weighs heaviest in your prospects' decision-making process.
- Keep the lines of communication open, especially if your project experiences a problem. If you made a mistake, admit it and work toward a solution.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to overcome shyness; 2) How to become aware of existing habits and create new ones; and 3) How wallflowers can learn to network.

### Recommendation

Ilise Benun's book starts out provocatively. She suggests, that you can change your disposition from shy to assertive by concentrating on your actions instead of your feelings. She provides lots of exercises for increasing your awareness of your emotional reactions and habits. She also offers advice on how to overcome shyness in a multitude of situations: sales presentations, networking events, job interviews and general office run-ins. Unfortunately, the book lacks depth in some areas. For instance, certainly there is a lot to be said for telling stories in your work life, but if you're shy, spinning a tale confidently seems like an advanced challenge. However, her core advice on how to stretch your abilities beyond your "comfort zone" is solid and actionable. For that achievement, *getAbstract* recommends her useful guide for making contact in business scenarios, despite your qualms.

## Abstract

*"As with all useful skills, self-confidence is developed through training and practice."*

### Break the Habit

Forty per cent of Americans consider themselves introverts. Science has even isolated a "shy gene," which helps explain why some people are naturally timid, but environment and routine contribute a lot, too. If your parents challenged you as a child to learn new things or play with others, then you developed assertiveness as a habit. Similarly, each time you shrink from asserting yourself, you strengthen the inclination to be shy. However, fear not. You can create new pathways in your brain that will hardwire you to act more confidently.

Take note of when and with whom you feel shy. Are you introverted around people whom you perceive to have higher status than you? Or during formal events? Visualize your fears. Be specific. Are you afraid to approach strangers in case they'll think you're stupid and stomp off in disgust? Picture this scenario in detail and you'll see how unrealistic it is. Making decisions based on your feelings is not the best idea. When you focus so intently on your inner self, you miss the world around you. You lose the opportunity to make your unique contribution.

To change an ingrained pattern, first you must want to change. Then you need to identify the pattern. Choose to be vigilant and recognize when the targeted behavior kicks in. At that moment of awareness, decide that you will make a different choice. Do this over and over. As you do, you will train yourself in a new habit. Build self-esteem by relying on your own competence and experience. Avoid comparing yourself to others. Set attainable, short-term goals, for example, making one cold call per day. Spend time imagining a pleasant, positive experience rather than a terrifying scenario. Get busy doing research. Preparation builds confidence.

### Curious Instead of Fearful

Developing your curiosity will encourage you to listen more fully to others. The first step is to admit that there's plenty you don't know. Ask questions to provoke deeper

*"Confidence comes as a direct result, not of success, but of effort."*

*“In today’s high-tech society, people are losing the art of day-to-day conversation.”*

*“Small talk is similar to kindling – hopefully, enough branches will burn to ignite the logs of real conversation, which can burn for much longer.”*

*“When someone asks you who you are...take the opportunity to highlight a project you’re working on. If you’ve acquired a new skill or accomplished a new goal, mention that.”*

*“When you are ready to move on, you can simply hand over your business card, smile warmly and say, ‘I’ve enjoyed chatting with you. I’m going to mingle a bit. Let’s stay in touch.’”*

exchanges. Listen not only to what’s being said, but also to what the other person might be trying to say. You can learn a lot from someone’s body language – for example, crossed arms indicate defensiveness – and from how open people are to taking the conversation to new levels. Be attentive to indications, like standing up or glancing at a clock, that the other person is ready to leave.

At networking events, wear a nametag. Add the name of your business, so your tag will invite conversation even if you are feeling shy. Look for others who might be timid and uncomfortable. Ask them what their interest is in the topic at hand. Again, start with a modest goal, such as attending just one or two events per month.

Prepare well to put yourself at ease. Research attendees you’d like to meet. Arrive early. Bring your business cards and try to swap them at the beginning of each encounter. You can write notes on the back of the card as you talk. This will convey the impression that you are attentive and interested, and it will give you fodder for follow-up exchanges. Even saying “hi” to the person you sit next to opens the opportunity for a conversation.

Small talk is the necessary first step in all relationships. The intent behind the inquiry, “What do you do?” is to get the conversational ball rolling. Instead of labeling yourself with your job title, describe your duties, your usual clientele, and your products or services. You can also talk about the latest movies, a recent scientific breakthrough, interesting trivia or even jury duty. Stand by the food and comment on the selection. Prepare an anecdote – everyone enjoys a good story and it helps people relax during a conversation. Take an interest in other people’s stories, too.

Lay the groundwork for further contact by listening actively. Look for common interests so you can contact the person afterward with relevant information. If the person has a unique hobby or interest, learn about it and refer to it later. See if you can provide information about a relevant contact or resource. Follow up as soon as possible. If you’re looking for a graceful way to end a conversation, explain that you should go and mingle, you need to phone home or you’re thirsty. Add, “It was nice meeting you,” then move on.

### **How to Project Confidence**

Arrive at face-to-face meetings with questions and a genuine interest in the answers. Bring work samples or a presentation about what you do. Bring up your past work experience to demonstrate how you’d be useful to the other person’s work. Watch for what piques their interest. If you allow people some conversational space, sometimes they will do all the work in shaping a discussion. Again, storytelling is an entertaining way to convey your competence and passion.

Construct your stories ahead of time. You want them to be about your work, not you, so drop “I” from your tales. Convey your enthusiasm for your work and paint a scene in which the other person could easily play a role. Give your story suspense and a climax. Add a sense of adventure or mystery, and your prospect will be hooked.

Evaluate your body language. Do you hunch your shoulders or avert your eyes when shaking hands? You might be conveying a false message of anxiety or fear. You express the majority of your body language unconsciously, but you can become conscious of its impression on others. Videotape yourself speaking and review the footage.

Project confidence by facing people and smiling, looking them in the eye and offering a steady handshake. Concentrate on making it easy for the other person to relax. A quick way to do this is to reflect the other person’s body language. Stand an arm’s

*“Spend more time establishing a connection with the person you’re calling before launching into your pitch. And train yourself to tune in to verbal cues.”*

*“The problem most people have is that they give up too soon. Getting through to someone, or getting a response, is a result of persistence.”*

*“The ability to say ‘no’ is crucial to success in business. It plays a role in managing, setting up realistic expectations, establishing trust and being a professional.”*

*“Disagreement is an aspect of healthy communication, and it gets more and more comfortable with practice. Without practice, however, it remains in your mind as confrontation.”*

distance away. Lean forward to show interest. Breathe deeply and slow your speech down, especially if you’re nervous.

### **Sales Skills**

Many people believe that selling means shoving something down someone’s throat whether he or she wants it or not. That’s not correct. The best salespeople have a strong desire to fill other people’s needs. They listen attentively and care about what the other person says. As a shy person, try to detach yourself from selling so that you’re neither overly happy about a “yes” nor devastated by a “no.” See it as just part of your business. Be enthusiastic about your product or service because you know it’s good. Even with all the luck and skill in the world, the average first sale takes a minimum of seven contacts, so be persistent. Don’t let your feelings keep you from following the right steps to closing a sale. Codify those steps – for instance, send a brochure, make phone contact and give a sales presentation – so your feelings remain out of the mix.

Most people will not invest the time to talk to you if they’re not actively seeking the service or product you’re offering. If your prospect asks for a presentation, be glad to have received such a strong signal of serious interest. The presentation lets both parties explore the possibility of a good business fit. Prepare strategies to overcome typical objections, such as pricing or an existing vendor. Consider creating a fact sheet or a sheet of frequently asked questions. Listen carefully to make sure you address the prospect’s particular concerns. If you can’t answer a question, offer to call back later with a response. Give your prospect time to make a decision.

### **Make That Call**

Some people who thrive in one-on-one meetings dread picking up the phone. They tell themselves that other people would contact them if they were interested, that they’ll just sound stupid or they’ll be a nuisance. Overcome these irrational fears. Make a quick call rather than withdrawing altogether from a personal encounter. Some situations require verbal contact: sensitive subjects, quick checks, and “back and forth” tasks such as scheduling meetings.

Prepare for your call by writing out your ideal phone conversation. Boil it down to a short list of important points. Have your opener ready: a statement of introduction and the reason for your call. Speak at a speed that gives the person time to let your information sink in and enunciate clearly. When you call someone, always ask if he or she would rather talk at a more convenient time. Accept silences as natural. Have an ending sentence that sums up what you talked about or agreed to do. Use all these elements later in an e-mail. If someone calls you, and you don’t want to talk or make a decision, simply say, “Let me think about it, I’ll call you back” or “I’ve got to leave in five minutes, but I can talk until then.”

Voice mail is your friend. It communicates more than a note taken by a secretary who wants only your contact information. Before you make a call, prepare a list of your questions so you can leave an informative voice mail message if the person doesn’t answer. Be brief, leave your return number, and let the person know if you’ll call back or try to contact him or her a different way. Always follow up after a day or two.

### **Outreach for Shy People**

E-mail is a great tool if you are shy. However, because it’s a nonvisual medium, you need to take extra care to communicate your message. Short, to-the-point e-mails can sound

*“Forcing yourself to reach out even when you don’t feel like it can change your mood drastically.”*

*“Perception is everything in business...The quieter you are, the louder your body language.”*

*“Consciously coordinate your body language with a verbal message.”*

brusque. They are no substitute for time spent personally with someone, nor can they replace hands-on management.

When you send an e-mail, use the subject line to convey your main intent. If need be, include a brief reminder about who you are and how you became acquainted with the recipient. State your business or make your request near the beginning of your message. Add in links or other supporting information. If you’re writing to more than one person, make it clear which requests go to which individuals. Always respond with the original message still intact. If you’re sending hefty or multiple attachments, consider zipping them together and mention that you’ve done so. Include your e-mail signature with contact information. Remember to double-check your spelling and cast one final eye over the intended recipients – both direct and copied – before you hit send.

Social-networking sites offer a virtual world of contacts. Building on the concept of “six degrees of separation,” some sites enable you to learn how people you know may be connected to someone you would like to know. These sites provide an informal way for you to advertise yourself, your talent and your experience. Join more than one site to multiply the advantages. Online discussion groups also offer ways to network with people in your industry.

### **Shyness in the Workplace**

If your team includes a shy person, focus on his or her particular assignments rather than on the shyness you detect. Give introverted employees the chance to prepare for meetings or presentations. Ask them to write down ideas in brainstorming sessions and collect their suggestions. This gives them the chance to reflect before responding, and you’ll get the benefit of their contributions. When you are critiquing a shy person’s performance, separate actions from personality. Be as specific as possible. Meet face to face, and patiently draw out responses. Office bullies may target shy people, so institute policies and routines to blunt this possibility.

Job interviews can be especially intimidating for shy people. Try to create a relaxing atmosphere by promising them all the information they will need about the company. Let them know they can ask questions, too, even after the interview is over. Ask for the stories behind their accomplishments and share some anecdotes. If you are being interviewed, you’re not obliged to answer questions that invade your personal boundaries.

### **Tough Conversations**

When preparing for a difficult conversation, clearly lay out the problem as you see it. Figure out what final result you want while envisaging the worst case scenario. What results could you live with if the worst happens? Give some thought to what events could disrupt your negotiation and prepare relevant responses. Outline what comes next. What do you want from the other person and how will you follow up? If you disagree with someone or if you’ve made a mistake, keep the dialogue open. Communicating frankly and speaking up right away can keep problems from escalating. Don’t be afraid to ask for help when you need it – you would gladly offer the same.

## **About the Author**

**Ilise Benun** is the co-founder of Marketing Mentor, a consulting company. She is a frequent speaker on marketing issues and self-promotion, and several other books including *Self-Promotion Online*. She co-authored *Public Relations for Dummies*.