

# OWN THE ROOM

## Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence

Amy Jen Su & Muriel Maignan Wilkins

### Where to find...

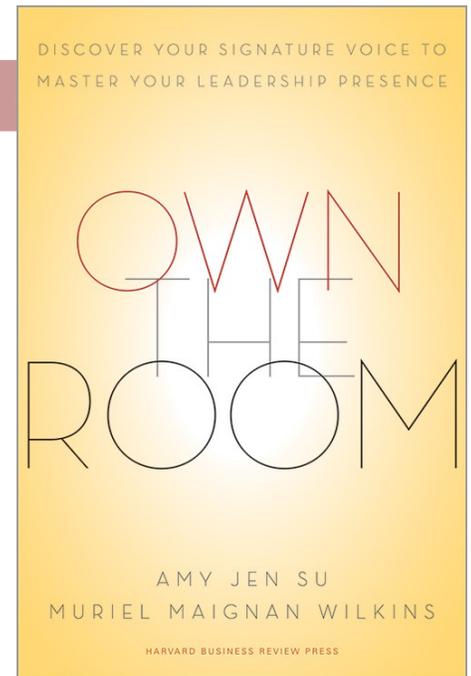
Voice for Self & Voice for Others	2
The Quadrants	3
Assumptions	4
Communication Strategies	5
Energy	6
The Signature Voice Journey	7
Helping Others	7
Critical Evaluation	8
Resources	8

### Summary

How able are you to have both a voice for self and a voice for others? How do your assumptions, communication strategies, and energy allow you to be a better leader for your team?

Throughout this book, Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins provide detailed information and exercises to help you discover where your presence lies based on the Signature Voice Model. Once individuals are able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, they are able to improve their voice and become more successful leaders as they transition through various roles within an organization.

Assuming all individuals possess the knowledge, your presence is what will set you apart. Being able to find your signature voice allows you to be yourself as you connect with others.



*“Leadership presence is the ability to consistently and clearly articulate your value proposition while influencing and connecting with others.”*

(Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 2)

### About the Authors

**Amy Jen Su** is a well-known speaker and coach on leadership issues and has helped leaders effectively communicate their visions. Along with her co-author, she is cofounder and managing partner at Isis Associates.



**Muriel Maignan Wilkins**, along with her co-author, is cofounder and managing partner at Isis Associates. Wilkins focuses on helping leaders with relationships, presence, and transitions. She was also named as one of the “Top Minority Business Leaders” by the Washington Business Journal.



#### My take-away message:

Focus on yourself. What can you change in how you act and interact with others to make yourself a better leader?

*“Leadership presence is the aggregate of these three things: what you believe, how you communicate, and the energy you express to others.” (p. 40)*

### How do I get to Signature Voice?

In any situation, having any one of the four types of voice may work. However, as you move into various roles within an organization, the need to have a voice for self as well as a voice for others increases. The differences between these voices is below.

As you move on the continuum between voice for self and voice for others, you are able to change how you approach situations and how you handle people. Someone with a high voice for self and a low voice for others is often more concerned with their own personal agenda. Similarly, someone with a low voice for self and a high voice for others would worry about how they are involving others in the process.

In different situations, it may be beneficial to show more of one voice than another. On a whole, however, it’s beneficial to try to be consistently showing a high voice for self and a high voice for others. This intersection creates your signature voice, which allows you to communicate your vision while also making others feel valuable.

As will be discussed on pages 4 and 5, you can work on your signature voice by considering the following three things: **A**ssumptions, **C**ommunication Strategies, and **E**nergy (or ACE).

#### Voice for Self

*“To what extent do I demonstrate my value and distinctiveness?” (p. 42)*

Those with a strong voice for self are typically very determined and motivated. They are often confident people who think that the way they do things is the best way. They often lack the connections with others and don’t take the time to hear out other opinions or ideas. These individuals may be described as impatient or intimidating.

#### SIGNATURE VOICE



The goal is to have an equal balance of voice for self and voice for others. Leaders who are able to find their signature voice are able to both easily describe their goals and vision, while also hearing out and considering the ideas of others.

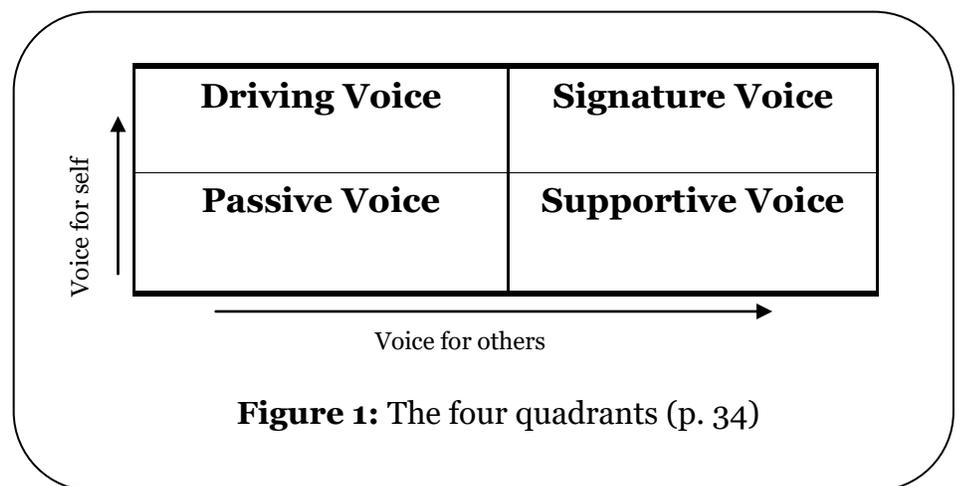
Most individuals have a natural tendency to favour one voice over the other. The key is to recognize where you stand on these spectrums and determine how you can change your thinking or actions to become balanced.

Individuals can slide back and forth between different quadrants (see Figure 1) as their voices change.

#### Voice for Others

*“To what extent do I connect and align with stakeholders?” (p. 42)*

Those with a strong voice for others are able to make connections and can easily get a sense for how others are feeling. They often try to accommodate the needs and feelings of others. As such, they may take on more than they can handle. These individuals may be described as thoughtful, kind and considerate.



**Figure 1:** The four quadrants (p. 34)

Driving voice describes the individual who is very concerned with their goals (or the goals of their team) but doesn't acknowledge others throughout this process. Everything is about them—that is, they have a very strong voice for self. They want the results that are best for their situation, at any cost.

Driven individuals are described as confident, judgmental, impatient or demanding.

They may say things like, "What does my team stand to gain or lose from this?" (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p.27) or "This is the right thing to do, even if people don't realize it yet" (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 27).

These individuals blame others for mistakes, don't see the need for collaboration and consensus, and wish to move quickly through meetings and decisions.

If you end up here, work on listening to others, collaborating, and providing a more open environment for others.

## Driving Voice

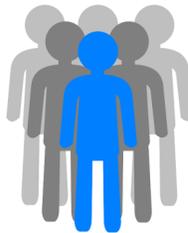


The goal is to have a balanced voice for self and voice for others, which would result in having a signature voice. Individuals in this quadrant are able to clearly express their own ideas, while also accepting the opinions of others.

They are able to lead a group that will work as partners and they use clear language to communicate their vision to the group. They are confident both verbally and in their appearance.

The idea here is that individuals can move into this quadrant if they make small changes to their voice. For example, an individual who is in the supportive voice must work on becoming more confident and clear and gaining a voice for self.

It's possible to move in and out of signature voice. This is an ongoing process for individuals and you will begin to recognize signs in yourself as you move between these four quadrants.



## Signature Voice



## Passive Voice



## Supportive Voice

The passive voice quadrant demonstrates a voice that can be harmful to an individual's leadership presence. Sometimes an individual ends up in this quadrant when there is a large problem in the workplace or when the individual feels uncomfortable.

For example, an individual can be comfortable being a leader in his current role. After a promotion, he is now sitting in a larger group among people who used to be his superiors. An individual who is passive may not speak up in this new environment.

Another example is Akio Toyoda (president of Toyota Motor Corporation), who slid to passive voice after some recall issues in millions of his cars. He wasn't visible during these issues.

People may describe others who end up here as passive, a wall-flower, passive-aggressive, defensive, shut down, or disengaged" (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 29).

If you end up in this quadrant, work on one of the voices (for self or for others) at a time.

The individual with supportive voice is often described as non-judgmental, approachable, collaborative, and patient. However, some people may be frustrated with this individual because of their inability to make quick decisions or to make their own values apparent.

They may say things like "I need more information before making the final call" (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 25) or "A lot of people are counting on us; we can't let them down" (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 25). These individuals prefer to listen to and consider the opinions of others before making decisions, try to avoid discussions involving conflict, and want to honour a commitment to get a job done.

If you end up in this quadrant, you need to work on taking a more direct role within your position. This could include voicing your opinions more prominently, sounding more confident, and being clear in your language.

# Assumptions

It's important for individuals to recognize what they believe and what they think. This includes, most importantly, your assumptions about what you are able to accomplish as a leader. Do you think you are capable of getting the job done? Do you doubt your ability to make effective decisions for your team? It's not necessary that these assumptions are spoken out loud. These thoughts can often be seen or sensed by your team, which can either negatively or positively affect your leadership and signature voice.

In order to become a better leader and gain that signature voice, you should focus on three things: confidence, perspective, and clarity. How you feel about each of these three things can force you to slide between the different quadrants.

*“Your beliefs about yourself, others, and the situation you are in have the power to bolster your presence but also to undermine it. What you think and feel deeply influence your own experience and how other people experience you.” (p. 55)*

How does this fit into the ACE Model?

**Assumptions**  
Communication Strategies  
Energy

## Confidence

Leaders must believe in their ability to be successful in their position, while being careful to not be too overpowering or confident. It can be helpful to consider where you gained your ideas of authority—such as, what were you taught about the relationships between staff and authority? In addition to possibly redefining what you believe about authority, you may also need to define your idea (and your organization's idea) of success. This will allow you to create new assumptions.

## Perspective

Leaders must consider what perspectives others are bringing to the situation. For example, you may get frustrated with someone because they are asking questions about something that you think is quite clear. It can be important to practice seeing other perspectives, whether or not you agree with them. Being objective while you consider all opinions within your team, you will be able to get a whole-picture perspective.

## Clarity

Clarity deals with the issue of how our core values affect our leadership. It's important for leaders to know what they value and to recognize that their negative or positive reactions to other opinions may be because of a misalignment of values. Since we know that there will always be differing opinions in the workplace, it's important to recognize the need to focus on a common goal. By looking at what you have in common, you may be able to agree more easily.

## Example: John

John is currently in the supportive voice quadrant, but he needs to make some adjustments to help move into the signature voice quadrant.

John received feedback from his partners saying the following: “he was a great team player and that he clearly worked hard to be collaborative and gain consensus” (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 55).

Although at first, these can seem like very positive traits, it must also be recognized that sometimes a leader must make decisions that not everyone agrees with. **His assumption was that the most important thing was to be a team player.** While he may be trying to avoid causing tension in the workplace, John needs to act as a leader of his team instead of just one of the players.

For John, he needed to reflect on his values. First, he needed to be honest with his team by expressing his voice instead of only listening to others. Both perspectives are important. He was also able to redefine his definition of team. Since he was now a leader within his group, he became a team player within the organization as a whole. Having more confidence will allow him to be comfortable sharing his opinions with both his group and his new peers.



Www.menhairstyles.net

# Communication Strategies

One of the first observations about someone is communication skills. It can be both about what is being said or how it's being said. It's important to consider whether you are presenting information in a way that provides a clear image for your audience. As part of it, you must recognize who your audience is and what they are hoping to gain from you. Similarly, you must be listening to the questions and responses of others, since this can help you immensely with your connections to others.

*“Your communication strategies are one of the first ways that people perceive you. Based on what you say, they make judgments about your presence and your competence as a leader.”*

*(Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 89)*

## Framing

When communicating with others, it's important to look at how you 'frame' your information. Much like you would choose an appropriate frame for a photograph, you must consider how you present information to various groups. For example, when explaining a very scientific concept to a group of doctors, you would use specific terminology and detail. When explaining the same concept to a group of parents, you would change the way the information is presented to ensure that there is an understanding of the topics. As part of this, it's important to provide the whole picture to others. Instead of focusing on one small aspect of a project, provide a context for your audience. As part of which 'frame' you choose, it's important to also know who your audience is.

## Advocacy

Advocacy is concerned with the clarity of your message. Many try to communicate a message, but it comes across confusing or unclear. Some common problems include providing too much information, not having a solution in mind or not asking for what you need. In order to effectively advocate, be clear to yourself on what outcome you are hoping for, who you are asking, as well as what your final message is.

## Listening and Engaging

Just as important as convey your message clearly is the ability to listen to others. It can be an important process to hear the concerns of others and have a positive connection. As stated, “influencing people is far more effective than pushing them in a certain direction and to influence, you need an awareness of others' viewpoints” (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 111). There are three levels of listening that must be mastered; these include surface listening (what they are actually saying), issues-based listening (the underlying message), and emotions-based listening (sensing underlying motivations or emotions). Some strategies that can help with listening and engaging others is to ask open-ended questions, acknowledge others, and building rapport.

## Our example: Susan

Susan rushes through meetings and is concerned with her tight deadlines. This results in cutting people off mid-thought during discussions, providing feedback which may affect the processes of her team, and creating a frustrated staff. Susan was not making a connection her audience and was not listening to what her team was trying to tell her. Susan should be taking these discussions as opportunities to make connections with her staff. She is focusing on strategies that are comfortable for her and not considering what her audience requires from her.

How does this fit into the ACE Model?

Assumptions

**Communication Strategies**

Energy



*“Communication is a fundamental leadership skill. It is the foundation for your presence. Like dribbling and shooting in basketball or throwing and hitting in baseball, communications skills are the basics that you need. [...] Communication skills are particularly important in establishing leadership presence because they are also how we connect with people.”*

*(Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 92)*



www.professionallimagedress.com

# Energy

Your energy can be expressed to others through your body language, as well as by your physical image or appearance. Without speaking, you can automatically convey a mood or opinion to someone else. This can be as simple as becoming tense or close bodied during a meeting, or by looking worn out or tired. Your body language can be easily interpreted and lead others to assumptions. It's important to keep in check with your body language, tone, and visibility.

*“When we talk about energy, we mean both the superficial layer—how you look—and the vibe you give off—the mood and tone you convey. How you appear to others matters as much as what you say.” (p. 123)*

How does this fit into the ACE Model?

Assumptions  
Communication Strategies  
**Energy**

## Body Language

There are six main body language cues that should be our focus as it relates to energy, which follow the word “CENTER”

1. Core posture
2. Eye contact
3. Natural gestures
4. Tone, tempo, timing
5. Expressions of the face
6. Regions and Territory

It can be difficult for individuals to put emphasis on how they interpret their own body language.

Negative impressions tend to mean more to individuals, so it's important to try to make interactions more positive.

Generally, an individual in supportive voice may seem uncomfortable, avoids eye contact, speaks softly, has a slouched posture and may be defensive. On the opposite end of the spectrum, individuals with driving voice may use a lot of physical space, speak loudly and quickly, use aggressive gestures and have intense eye contact.

## Tone

When considering tone, you should be considering the affect of your tone on others, the situation you are in, and your own physical rituals that help with maintaining an appropriate tone. It was stated that “tone is contagious” (p. 139), which is true in both a positive and negative sense. Leaders often set the tone for their followers, so it's important to set a good tone so that you have happy employees. It's completely appropriate to have different tones based on the situation, such as when you are trying to motivate your staff or when an issue has arisen in a project. Having a ritual, such as listening to music or doing yoga, can help a leader to return to a state where they are able to use an appropriate tone with their audience.

## Visibility

Part of the role of a leader is to be visible to key partners and staff. It's important for a leader to recognize who should be on your radar and to ensure that you are making connections regularly with these people. Connections can be operational (with individuals who are in your immediate environment), personal (outside of work), or strategic (with individuals who may help your organizational goal). Those in supportive voice must be sure to reach out for these connections and those in driving voice must recognize the importance of the connections with peers.



## Our example: Doris

Doris was starting a new position and had a lot of responsibility that she was adjusting to. She had new projects to learn, as well as new staff to become acquainted with. As part of her job, she knew that she needed to network with other strategic partners, as well as be very visible to her own team. However, she often closed her door while at work because she just needed the alone time.

In this current role, she is demonstrating supportive voice because she is not being proactive. She is merely meeting daily needs and meeting individuals who have a specific purpose within her projects or who have requested time with her.

Doris needs to focus on becoming more visible to key stakeholders and recognize that part of being a leader within her position is to be available to those who need her and to also form new connections which could help with future projects.



## “Signature Voice is a Journey” (p. 155)

Once someone has found their Signature Voice and is able to successfully recognize what they must do to maintain a high level of voice for self and voice for others, they must continue to work at it. The authors compare finding your signature voice to becoming a professional athlete—you do a lot of work to get to the top, but you must continue to maintain your training if you want to remain there. The same thing applies to your signature voice, since you must continue to adapt to your situations and environment.

Some common triggers which may result in a slide back to supportive or driving voice include reorganization, new leadership, a promotion, or lagging performance (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 159).

The other important thing to recognize is that your values should continue to align with the values of the organization. It can be difficult for a leader to maintain their signature voice if they no longer feel connected to the organization. In some of these cases, the leader would need to recognize when it's time to make a change in their goals since, as mentioned, the attitudes that you bring to a situation can greatly affect the attitudes of those around you.



*“The unwillingness to listen to and accept feedback about how others perceive you is one of the biggest obstacles to building leadership presence.” (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 45)*

## Helping Others

As a manager, it's possible to help coach your team members into gaining a signature voice. By providing both positive and constructive feedback, you are demonstrating to your team member both the things that they already do that are aligned with a signature voice and letting them know their areas of improvement. By creating an action plan with specific links to the ACE model and allowing open conversations about the search for the signature voice, you can help your team members grow.





# Critical Evaluation

Overall, I feel like the idea of a Signature Voice is a good one. I think that based on feedback from others, an individual could absolutely determine where they lie with respect to the four quadrants—passive, driving, supportive, or signature voice.

My concern with the ideas presented was how simple they made this transition into signature voice to be. While they do emphasize the fact that “signature voice is a journey” (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 155) and that it’s an ongoing process with lots of back and forth, all of the fixes that were suggested seemed quite easy. For example, a fix for the energy concept of visibility was to determine who you should be visible to and then basically have interactions with these people.

There was an excessive use of case studies used throughout the book which were used to highlight some of these ‘fixes.’ I understand the benefits of using a case study to provide specific examples, however in addition to two recurring cases (John and Terri), you were also introduced to multiple other individuals throughout the book. It became very much like a small collection of case studies with tiny bits of information linked to these cases. There are a multitude of small things that an individual would need to do in order to reach the Signature Voice and these case studies, while relevant to the individual chapters, made it hard to connect all these concepts and forced us to focus very specifically on one aspect at a time instead of looking at the big picture throughout the book.

Many types of leadership touch on the concept of signature voice. There is reference to adaptive leadership (Jen Su & Maignan Wilkins, 2013, p. 77) when perspective is explained since there is an emphasis on the communication levels between leader and follower. Other traits and characteristics described by Northouse (2016), such as being open, approachable, accepting, confident, and conscientious (Northouse, 2016, p. 27) are also incorporated into the various pieces of the Signature Voice model. Other leadership styles, such as authentic leadership, and approaches, such as the behavioral approach and the path-goal theory, are also somewhat related to this model.

The idea of Signature Voice can be useful when dealing with changes or issues in leadership. I think it would take a lot more effort and analysis on the part of the individual to discover what they need to change in order to be a more effective leader. If anything, I feel that the appendix at the back of the book includes the most important point of reference for individuals who are trying to implement this model into their own situations.

## Questions to Consider:

- Which part of the ACE Method do you think has the most impact on an individual’s ability to reach their Signature Voice—assumptions, communication strategies, or energy?
- Are individuals capable of reaching Signature Voice in some environments, but have a difficult time reaching it in another environment?
- How do you feel about receiving criticisms or suggestions of improvement? What do you think is required from a manager to help you with productively using this criticism to improve your voice?
- Where do you think you fall within the four quadrants? What strategies could you use to move yourself into the Signature Voice quadrant?
- Do you think you’ve ever used Signature Voice? Do you think you can ever reach the Signature Voice?

## References:

- Jen Su, A. & Maignan Wilkins, M. (2013). *Own the Room: Discover your signature voice to master your leadership presence*. Boston: MA.
- Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## You may enjoy the following TED Talks:

- Cathcart, J. (2013, October 17). Jim Cathcart: How to believe in yourself [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ki9-0aPwHs>
- Cuddy, A. (2012, October 1). Amy Cuddy: Your body language shapes who you are [Video file]. Retrieved from [http://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are)