Transcript
Episode 01:
Speak and Be Heard, with Katie Gore

Intro

[intro music plays]

Rosie: Welcome to Changing Lenses! I'm on a personal journey to explore how we can make our world more inclusive and compassionate, and our lives more fulfilling and sustainable. Along the way, I've been meeting some amazing Canadians doing amazing things. By listening to their stories and experiences, I hope we will change our lens to see from a more inclusive perspective, and be inspired to build a better world.

I'm your host, Rosie Yeung, and I invite you to join me as we change our lenses together. Because changing our lens, changes what we see; and when we see differently, we can live differently.

[Intro music ends]

Rosie: Hi everyone! Thanks for joining us on this episode of Changing Lenses. Today, we'll be talking to Katie Gore, a certified speech-language pathologist, and the Founder and Principal of speechIRL, a consulting firm which helps organizations create culture change through communication. Katie grew up in Canada and currently lives in the US where she is the founder of the Chicago chapter of the National Stuttering Association, and Chair of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force for the Illinois speech language hearing association - among other volunteer roles.

Katie is also a fan of Marvel comics - and she actually reads them, not just watches the movies like I do. So Katie, welcome, and thank you so much for being here today.

Katie: Thank you. I am so excited to be here!

Rosie: Awesome. So today we'll be chatting with Katie about inclusion and discrimination around speech and language, which is related, but not specific to, race or gender.

Now, when you think about discrimination in the workplace, how people talk might not be the first thing that comes to mind. Definitely it wasn't for me. Katie has lots of insights and experience to share about this. So if this is a new area for you too, I think you'll be interested to hear what she has to say.

Safe Space Commitment

But before we really dive in, there's something I want to say to our guests and listeners on every episode. Talking about inclusion and discrimination is very sensitive, and I want you, Katie, to feel safe and comfortable to be yourself, to be honest, and to be authentic.

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Some of what we discuss might be challenging for you to say, and for our listeners to hear, but I really want us to have an open and genuine conversation. So I commit to you and our listeners to be respectful, to be kind, and to be honest and authentic myself. And I also invite you to call me out if I say anything inappropriate, and correct me if I use the wrong language.

And I commit that the foundation of our discussion is to raise awareness and lift people up, not to gossip or bring people down. So Katie, will you accept my commitment to you?

Katie: Absolutely.

Rosie: Thank you. So now that we have laid some of the groundwork for this, let's get started!

And I want to say again, just how grateful I am for you being here today as actually my very first guest ever on this podcast.

I am fascinated by the work that you do, and just the whole topic. So I have so many questions for you, which you might not get to, but let's just start off easy.

Katie's work in speech and communication

So I gave a little bit about your bio in the introduction, and to be totally honest, I didn't really know half of what I was saying. So can you just start us off by telling us a bit more about what you do and what that looks like on a day-to-day basis?

Katie: Yeah. So, my background, my training is as a speech-language pathologist. And so, speechIRL, when it was first founded, was and is a speech therapy practice. And most people, when they think of speech therapy, they think of, you know, small children who were struggling to communicate or speak, or perhaps older adults who have had a stroke or some sort of medical condition later on in their life that we associate with old age.

And that is true for the vast majority of folks who work in this field. The work that we do at speechIRL is focused specifically on professionals. So often our younger folks tend to be in college or maybe late high school, and then going into early career, mid-career and late career. And we work with people who may have a diagnosed speech or communication challenge.

So something like stuttering or having a lisp, or having challenges with something like, attention deficit or autism or something, they just feel like they've got - they've always had a hard time communicating and they feel like there's a reason why, but never got an official diagnosis. And then we also work with people who don't have any identified - don't identify as having any diagnosis, but, you know, just want to improve their communication. So that might fall into more of the traditional bucket of executive presence.

So that's how we started. And we bring our speech therapy skills there, but then over time, what we do as a practice has evolved. And the reason it evolved for me personally was because I spent a lot of time working with very intelligent, very ambitious, very capable professionals who had a communication disorder of some kind. Stuttering is one of our big specialties. That's one of my personal passion points, but a variety of others as well. And you know, these folks would come in and

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work so hard on doing everything they can to get there, you know, to be the best communicator they could be.

Neurodiversity means that people are wired differently - like being left-handed or right-handed

But often that means embracing some element of yourself that is different from other people. So we take a really heavy neurodiversity approach to the way that we do our work. Which really means understanding and accepting that people are wired differently. So this is the term neurodiversity sort of started in the autism community, but it can be applied a little more broadly as well.

So, you know, you could, at a very simple level, you could think of it like left-handed and right-handed, right? Some people are left-handed, some people are right-handed, and we used to live in a society where if you were left handed, we punished you and we perhaps even physically beat you until you learn to use your right hand.

And then as society, we got to a point where like, or we could just let people use their left hand and that would be fine. And that's an extremely simple example of how - of a type of neurodiversity. But this could apply for the way you think, the way you perceive the world, the way you hear, the way you communicate, the way you emotionally process, all of those are part of it.

Anyway, so working with folks like this, who would work so hard to do everything they could to fit in, but also trying to understand and be authentic to who they are, like, this is how my body needs to communicate. This is how my brain needs to process. This is what I need to do to move through the world.

But - and that's great if you can come to peace with all those things. But then if you were in an environment that refuses to also acknowledge and accept you for who you are, you are not going to make any progress. And so I got really really frustrated seeing all of these wonderful clients that I worked with who had worked so hard on their communication and were fabulous communicators, but there just might've been one little piece about them that was slightly different than the way most other people communicated.

And they would be completely shut out from professional opportunities, social opportunities in some cases as well. And so that really drove me to see, OK, can we go in above the glass ceiling and start to put some chips in it from the top, as opposed to having people stand underneath it one by one. And you know, I'm really passionate about teaching self-advocacy, but there's a certain point at which like you shouldn't have to self-advocate and other people need to just get onboard.

So that sort of is how we got into what now falls into the diversity, equity and inclusion bucket. It wasn't that I was intentionally trying to go there, it just - it sort of, it naturally falls in there. And then from then, from being in that space, all the intersectionality that comes out of that, now I found myself having other conversations about things that aren't always related to communication.

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But I always tend to come at it from a communication lens. So on a day-to-day basis, I see a couple of individual clients still. I do a lot of facilitation and conversation work, you know, developing trainings. I teach speech pathologists and try to sort of infuse this more social model of disability or neurodiversity model of approaching communication vs. a medical model where it's like, "Oh, you have a diagnosis, so we need to fix you so that you can be like everyone else."

So my schedule is all over the place, but I'm very, very thankful that I get to do what I do. It's a lot of fun and I'm constantly learning new things and talking with people who have had experiences that I didn't even know existed. So I'll stop there.

Rosie: Wow. That - OK, there's so much there already that I want to dig into. So - OK, so let me just pick up on what you said around neurodiversity. Cause then you say that, I mean, I'm no medical person, but I just think brain. But you're using neurodiversity in the context of speaking, which I would have just been like, that's your mouth, or you know, verbal stuff, right? So how - what is the link between neurodiversity and our speech and communication?

Katie: Yeah, that is a great question. So yeah, neurodiversity really refers to the unique wiring of your brain, which both impacts how you perceive and take in the world around you from a sensory standpoint, and then how your brain puts information together.

And then based on how that information is put together, how you behave in return, right? So how you speak, how you walk, how you make choices in your life, what you think is interesting, what you think isn't interesting, all of that. And so very broadly, you could think of neurodiversity as, sort of the sum collective of your cognitive experiences, your emotional experiences, your thoughts and emotions and your physical experiences.

Speech is one part of - or the way we talk as part of that. So communication is a very cognitive process, right? Cause you have to think about the place that you're in, you have to think about the people you're talking to. You have to think about your knowledge of the conversation that's going on and all the words that are associated with that, all of the emotions that are associated with that, how comfortable you feel with the topic. You have to put that into words and speak it out.

And then there's all these non-verbal elements as well. Like your tone of voice while you're doing it, your body language while you're doing it. And you know, matching the level of what you're saying to the level of your - your perceived level of the people that you're talking to, right. So you know, know your audience, speak to your audience.

Rosie: Right, yeah.

Katie: So communication is a very, very - I mean, it is a brain based process. That's also very much coloured by our emotions, right? When we're very emotional about something it very much impacts the way we communicate about it. So I don't know if that answers...

The King's Speech...problem? Or whatchamacallit?

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Rosie: OK, so, well, um, so let's - just to try to make it understandable for people like me, [laughs], who's not deeply familiar with the topic. Cause when, I mean, I guess when I think about speech therapy, the only thing, or the first thing that comes to mind is like that example, The King's Speech, the movie that came out about one of the English Kings in the 19th or 20th century somewhere who had a very severe stutter, but he needed to make public speeches.

And so, one of my takeaways right now is that there's, I'll call them "problems", cause I don't know what to call them, that people want to fix to make - I guess, just self-improvement, as well as to genuinely make themselves more understandable.

And actually on that point, because I do want to be respectful in my language. Is there a term for that? Like, I've been using speech impediment, but I feel like that's a very disabling term. What would you call a "speech problem" that needs to be cured? If there is such a thing.

Katie: Yeah, you know, I think - there isn't within the speech community, I think, an agreed upon, "this is what we should call it".

So certainly yeah, we can react directly, "Oh, it doesn't feel right to call it a problem." I do know, I know a lot of people in the speech community who still use the words speech impediment, or they'll say "I have a speech impediment" because that is a word that is generally understood. And so they find it a very practical word to use, you know, speech issues, speech challenge. Speech difference, if you're trying to be, sort of, more on the neurodiversity side. But the thing is the differences can lead to problems. Not because the person themselves or the difference itself is a problem, but it can create these breakdowns.

And so "problem" is a word that we use a lot in our office because the person who has the speech difference is experiencing many problems. And so it can be a shorthand for that. So I would say for the purposes of our conversation, use whatever word feels most true for the context. And yeah if you're talking about, you know, in the movie, the King had a lot of speech problems. He encountered a lot of problems because of his speech. So I think myself and my speech folks would all be like, you're cool. But it's a good meta thing to be aware of. Yeah.

Rosie's "small" speech difference

Rosie: So, what would be, a difference, I guess, for just encountering it in everyday life? So let me think about my work experience, where I'm a smaller person, I'm under five feet tall. I think that also means my lungs are probably smaller than other people. And something I encountered a lot when I was speaking in meetings or doing small presentations, we're not talking hundreds of people, maybe 10 or 30 people at the most, people would often be telling me, "Speak up, Rosie, we can't hear you." And I think in terms of speech patterns, they would also say, "Rosie, you speak too quickly, make sure you slow down."

But to me, that was just my natural way of speaking. And so is that - I mean, is that an example, maybe, of neurodiversity? Where I would have to change inherently who I am or how I naturally talk to suit

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someone else that - I can understand why it would be beneficial to my listener, but if I didn't have to change it, I wouldn't, because that's just kind of how I am.

Katie: Yeah. So I don't know if you realize, but like, that question you just asked is like the crux of the conversations that we have all the time. So both of those patterns that you described, the speaking too fast, and/or speaking too quietly, those are very common things that someone might come to us to work on because they've received that feedback.

And that question you just posed, like, well, is this my problem? Or is this the listener's problem? You know, maybe they should just pay more attention, or like, go get their hearing checked or something, you know?

Rosie: [laughs] Yes. I told my mom that all the time. Yeah.

Katie: Exactly. You know, there are modifications that they could make perhaps to be more easily heard by you.

And one of the things that is interesting with speech and voice is, it's not - it's not like race, right? You can change the way you talk, and you can change it to varying degrees. But just because you can, should you? And ultimately how someone parses that out is a very personal question.

And I think particularly for professionals and professionals who you know, maybe are very passionate about issues like diversity and inequity and things like that. It's a really loaded question because we do want to be accepted the way we are and we want other people to be accepted the way they are, but in a workplace setting, you know, there's the whole sort of bring your whole self to work, but sometimes I'm like, well, that's not totally true. Cause I don't show up to work in my pyjamas. I mean, I do now cause it's a pandemic, but - you know - I'm wearing a sort of clean shirt, so...

Rosie: Right, yeah. [laughs]

Katie: So you know, we do modify things about ourselves when we step into the professional environment, right? And we choose to elevate certain features of ourselves because we want to be seen a certain way.

But then there's also things that are very core to our being that we also want to be welcome in the workplace and to be accepted in the workplace. And the way you talk can fall into either one of those camps. It could be something that you choose to modify so that you are seen a certain way, or it could be something that feels really core to who you are, or it can be kind of in the middle.

And so often what we do in our work is we like to take the approach of building people's flexibility in the way they communicate. Because it can be very limiting if you only have one way to talk, and you might feel like that is the core of who you are. But then you might, you know, just because I would like us to live in a better world, but like, we live in the world as it is now. And so that might not give you access to certain opportunities.

And so, having the flexibility to choose to step into that space, I mean, it's essentially code switching, right? Giving yourself the ability to code switch doesn't mean you should, doesn't mean you have to.

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And if you do choose to, should be very conscious of what you're doing and all the layers there. But it's good to have the ability to do that, just to have that option available to you.

Sounding less Black

Katie: And so, sometimes we'll work with clients where they'll say, I want the ability to do this. And I mean, you know, we work with - we have clients who come in who say, "I'm Black and I want to sound less Black so I can go to work."

And that's, you know, I'm a White person, I'm like, OK, I feel like there's a lot going on here to talk about. So you're saying that's what you want to learn, and I can teach you that skill, but, there's a lot of contexts that, you know, might be good to explore as you're going about wanting to learn this, this extra dialect essentially. Um...yeah.

Rosie: So yeah, I want to pick up on that, because I've heard - I think there was actually a movie that came out recently, which I can't remember what it's called, but it was kind of a parody about exactly that, where there is a Black man who is at a call centre. Do you remember the movie I'm talking about?

Katie: Yes, and it's on my list, I am so bad at watching movies.

Rosie: Yeah! Me too - oh...

Katie: Yeah. It'll come to us and we'll both just randomly yell it out later in the episode, right?

Rosie: That's right, yes. Something like, "Thank you for your..." - no, or, "I apologize for..." - I don't remember. OK, sorry. I'm gonna stop guessing.

But it was about a Black man, on a call centre, and wasn't that successful until he turned his voice into a White sounding voice. And I'm not Black, but I sort of intuitively knew what they were talking about, changing the way you sound to make yourself more appealing, even though you shouldn't have to.

So, I mean, it's interesting what you said about, I guess, employees coming to you and saying, I want to sound less Black. Do you ever get - I do want to hear more about that, like is that even possible, what does that mean? But also, do you ever get employers - cause I would think that would be really wrong for them to do that - but do they ever come in and say, "this person doesn't sound professional enough", or I don't know how they would couch it, but really what they mean is, “they sound too Black.”

Katie: So I, yeah, I haven't had any referrals from employers saying...yes and the words they would use is "you don't sound professional enough" where it's been clearly like, no, you sound too Black. The one we most commonly get where it is an employer initiated referral (that the employee goes along with, cause they're the ones who have to contact us), is most typically young women. And it's young women who are told, essentially, that they sound too feminine, or they don't sound professional enough. They need to sound more authoritative. You know, "you're really great at your job, but nobody will take you seriously in a presentation, so go change the way you talk."

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And then the other one is also the one that you mentioned about not being loud enough, not being heard enough. And we get do the referrals from both men and women for that, you know, men who are very soft spoken as well.

Do women have to change their voices to be taken seriously?

Rosie: So I - OK. So - oh gosh, there's a lot to dig in there too.

And I've heard that. And, I mean, I would agree I think that speaking isn't, or shouldn't really be specific to race, but I do feel like there's patterns that can turn into stereotypes. And for example, speaking as a small Asian woman, I worked at a professional accounting firm with other small Asians, most of whom were small Asian women. And I think there was a, not taking us too seriously, mostly because of the way we looked. Because we were petite, we were young, so you know, we looked - and Asians again, stereotypically, they look younger than they even really are. So we already looked even younger.

And then add to that, if we have, maybe "cute" sounding voices, I'll say, or, not loud projecting white male voices. I mean, now - I think this was 20 years ago when I first started working there - now I kind of feel like, well, do we have to sound like deep-voiced white men with really projecting voices in order to be executive? Like, can we not have little voices and still sound executive? Or - isn't that an old paradigm, or is that, I mean, do you think -

Sorry.

In your professional opinion, or in what you're seeing as patterns, how much do people really need to change their voices in order to be accepted or be taken seriously these days?

Katie: Yeah. So that is a big question. And there's a direct- I think the general answer to it sort of goes in one direction. And then the specific thing about what you said about, or the little voices or the deep voices, there's a different, there's another angle at work there that I want to comment on. So I'll say, so maybe I'll comment on the specific angle first and then I'll come back to the general question.

Rosie: Sure.

Primal biological mechanisms (i.e. James Earl Jones vs. mice)

Katie: So yeah, one of the fascinating things about the voice, particularly in terms of what we might, what most people would associate with pitch, right - high, low, or loud, quiet. There is a very, sort of primal biological mechanism going on there. And so we actually have a workshop that we do, we have a three hour workshop on this called Voice, Gender, Power and Professionalism, where we get into this topic.

And one of the challenge - and this gets down to very structural aspects of acoustic - like physics and acoustics. And how we register those sounds.

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So just in the world that we're in, think about the types of things that make really big, deep, booming sound. And then think about the kinds of things that make like high-pitched quiet sounds.

Rosie: OK.

Katie: The things that make the big sounds are generally more threatening. And if you hear a noise like that, it causes your body to have a certain reaction. And this is just, you know, this is not a voice in particular, this is just environmental noises. It's going to arrest your attention a certain way, it's going to cause you to react in a certain way and pay attention in a certain way.

Versus if you heard like a little squeak.

Rosie: Right.

Katie: You know, you react to that very differently, right? And so this is something for - I'm going to talk about men and women here, which is binary - but I'm going to use that - or, male and female would be more accurate sort of a shorthand, for the structural vocal mechanism that exists in the throat.

So, males have, you know, larger vocal tracks, so they make deeper sounds typically. And women, females, have smaller ones, so you get more higher pitch sounds, just like - you know, that's why a cello and a violin sound different, right, the cello is larger. You get a bigger, deeper sound.

And so for women in the workplace with higher pitch noises, it's absolutely true that people implicitly, unconsciously respond differently to these lower male voices versus these higher female voices. But that's really consistent with how we respond to noises in that pitch and volume range generally in the world.

And it is not, frankly, physically possible for females who have small little vocal tracks to talk like James Earl Jones. It physically cannot be done. But, so the flip side there is, it doesn't mean that females should have to be relegated to, you know, being perceived as a kitten or a mouse or something in that same vocal category just because we sound a certain way.

So that's where I think things like implicit bias training is so important. It's to recognize, like, OK, I have a very petite coworker who has sort of maybe a petite voice if you could call it that. And when I hear her voice, and even if I have done all the training in the world and everything, my brain is just going to process it a certain way, because that's how my brain - let's say a human brain, and even a lot of animal brains - process those sounds. So what can I do to overcome that implicit reaction that I have?

And this same thing applies for tall people and short people, right? Things that are larger than you are more intimidating, so you're going to pay more attention to them. Things that are smaller than you are less intimidating, so you're not going to feel the same threat and the sort of automatic response to attention. But that doesn't mean that you should only respect your tall coworkers and not respect the coworkers that are smaller in stature than you.

So that's...I kinda got on a tangent there.

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Historic power paradigms, and speaking powerfully

Rosie: No, that's really good. OK. Let's talk about something that I found - not I found, but that speechIRL offers as a service too. Cause my brain is also going to, when you just talk about the human anatomy or physiology part of it, I was like, well, threatening doesn't sound good. So, well, shouldn't I actually then be intimidated or scared?

And you would think that would be actually a potentially a negative trait for a male voice. But a lot of times it's actually desired to have. Like in sales, or you know, these things that - maybe it's because it commands power. So it turns into a positive thing.

But I also see how it gets used against women, or females, not just because they aren't taken as seriously necessarily. But if there's a situation where it's like, "Oh, we need a gentler person or a gentler tone to go in and, you know, massage things through, let's send that woman in because, you know, they'll not be as intimidated by her."

So it seems like it's being treated as a positive thing, but it actually really isn't in a way, cause they're saying, "Well, she's not threatening". Meaning she doesn't exude power, she doesn't come across as, I think, maybe as smart, right? Or as executive as someone else. And so we'll put her into the soft situations, and we'll send the man in to, you know, the tougher situations, cause they can handle it.

And I never really thought about how just basic physiology could get to that point. But I mean, is that kind of an interpretation of what you're saying the result could be from our, just the male and female anatomy?

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's why these things are hard when it comes to communication. Because the way we communicate is in many ways, it is influenced by the bodies that we have. It's influenced by the vocal tracks you have, by how tall you are, by the wiring that you have in your brain. And that's why we get personalities and all of these things.

And in the workplace culture that we have, historically and both presently, certain types of communication styles and communication abilities, which could be having a certain pitch or a certain tone, have been prized over others or seen as more powerful.

And so a lot of the work that we do is talking about power, which is such a complicated and interesting phenomenon, but how can you create that with what you've been given?

And so for some people, yes, in a really historic paradigm, being powerful meant being loud, it meant being scary, it meant dominating the room and not letting other people talk. But you know, I think increasingly in the business culture, there's an understanding that's definitely not the best way to lead and manage. And there's more appreciation for a lot of different ways of communicating power. And for some people, what works is having a loud voice and being the biggest person in the room.

And some people exude power by being very quiet and by speaking very rarely, but when they do speak up, everybody pays attention to them. And so that's a really important thing when you are exploring something about the way you speak. To understand, what have I been given? What is

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possible for me to do and to achieve? And what can I flex to really own the kind of power that makes sense for me to have in a way that has the effect on other people that I want it to.

When the "gender" of your voice doesn't reflect who you are

Rosie: OK. So I want to segue off of that one, but talk about gender communication service or therapy that speechIRL provides. And when I was reading about it on your website, I thought it was fascinating. I could see some very good reasons to do it, but it was all - you know, to be honest - it was a trigger for me.

Cause it sounds like - why should anyone, and I'm thinking in particular transgender people - why should anyone feel forced to, or want to, change their voice? So can you maybe talk just a bit about what that service is? And also, what are some of the reasons that people have given you who've come asking for your help with this?

Katie: Yeah, definitely. And I will preface this by saying this is not an area of clinical specialty for me. We have a couple other specialists at our practice who this is all they do. So I will speak high level to it. But if there are folks listening to this who like, know a lot more about it, I would love the correction. So Michelle can call me out (she's my coworker).

So yeah, at a very basic level, where people will typically seek this out is a case of a person who is transitioning binary gender. So male to female or female to male. Most commonly we see female to male. So a person who was assigned female at birth, and then they're transitioning to male.

And that's because, going back to the thing about vocal physiology, even if you're taking hormone replacement therapy, and things like that. That does not, if you were assigned male at birth and have a, sort of a large male vocal tract, the sorts of therapies that a person or medical interventions, a person might have to affirm their gender, does not change the size of the vocal tract. And so you'll have-

Or sorry, male to female, I think I might've been going backwards there. So if you were assigned male at birth, and you're transitioning to female, your voice might still sound very, very male. And so the person feels that the way they speak is not consistent, not congruent with their gender. And so they seek therapy to behaviourally learn to modify their voice so that their voice matches who they are as a person and is authentic to them.

Another reason people might do it is they identify as nonbinary or gender-fluid, and they want to have that flexibility. So again, maybe I was assigned male at birth, and so I have this very deep male sounding voice. And so I get clocked as a man because I sound like a male. And I want to be able to adjust the way I speak so that I can, you know, sort of show my nonbinary-ness. Or if I'm fluid, sort of show different aspects on different days, however I want to do it.

So it's really, again, just to give people more flexibility and more access to the identity that they have and making sure that what is coming out of their mouth is showing the world who they really are and who they really want to be seen as.

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Rosie: Oh OK, that's actually helpful for me. Cause you know, my first reaction when I thought about it was, well it's not really, it didn't seem fair. To people to feel - again, if it was a perfect fantasy world, no one would need to do that, cause they would just be accepted as they are. And they wouldn't need to sound more male or more female.

But I could also see, if someone did change their gender to be more true to who they think they really are, but their physiology just didn't match with that. Then it's actually - would you say maybe it's a good thing for them? Because then they are getting the help to transform into who they think their authentic self is by being able to also speak more like who they think they really are. Is that some of the motivation?

Katie: Absolutely. Yeah. So it is a very - I've met a couple of the folks that come to our practice and I will say, the voice work for individuals who are exploring gender or transitioning gender, the voice work can - for some people, right, everyone who goes through this process values different things, but - the voice work can be a tremendously foundational cornerstone to that personal journey for them.

And because it is so much of the way we sound. Like even think about when you're on the phone with someone. If you just hear the sound "hello", you can draw some conclusions about who the person is that you're talking to, just from the sound, the timber, the pitch, the speed of that "hello".

And we have a lot of folks who, um... Which is another area where this shows up, is there's something called puberphonia, which is for cis-gender males, but their voice does not drop during puberty. So even as a grown adult, they will sound prepubescent or will sound like a woman, is how a lot of people perceive that.

And so I've had a couple of those clients and they'll say, "I'm so tired of when I have to call my bank and they say, 'How are you Mrs. Smith?' Because I'm Mr. Smith." And it's just from that sound. So the way we speak tells - whether we want it to or not, it gives people a lot of information about us. So it's really about making sure that the information my voice and my speech is giving out, is the information that I want people to have.

Rosie: OK. So, some of our listeners might be wondering, how do you, like... If physiologically our vocal chords are built a certain way so that it misses a certain sound, I'm also kind of curious - I *am* curious about how - what the therapy looks like to do that. But just for the sake of time, and trying to stay on topic, maybe we'll do that in another episode someday? So I just want to kind of acknowledge that might be out there, but I'm going to try to stay with a, sort of an inclusion and equity lens about this topic.

"Being articulate" in speech therapy

So let's go back to talking about, how it might affect different racialized people. And in particular, I want to touch on one of the other specialty practices for speechIRL, which is articulation therapy. And for the way it's described on your website, it talks about working on accents and I'm guessing the different tones as well.

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And I do want to get to the trigger point of being articulate that I think we've been hearing a lot in the media, particularly from people who are Black and Indigenous and how they have been - have received discrimination, using that word, articulate.

But let's just start with, what is articulation therapy that speechIRL provides?

Katie: Great question. And one thing that's funny about this word is, the word articulation to a speech therapist means the complete opposite of what it means to everybody else in the world. So when we say, "Oh, someone is so articulate", we typically mean they have a large vocabulary, they speak in very well-formed sentences. It's a lot about their grammar and their vocabulary and that sort of thing.

When speech pathologists talk about articulation, we are talking about physically how you form the sounds. So articulation therapy specifically refers to, are you making crisp sounds? So someone who has a lisp and wants to work on their lisp, that would fall under articulation therapy.

Or kids (and adults), but you know, kids who say "wabbit", that would fall into articulation therapy. We teach them how to say "r", which is a really hard thing to teach. So that's why accent typically falls under there as well, because if someone has an accent and they would like to work on it, what they're working on is reshaping very specific aspects of the way they're making certain sounds.

Rosie: Got it. So that makes a lot of sense. And I knew there was something that would probably be very technical about it, and that's why I wanted to make sure I understood what that meant.

Understanding accents - inclusion goes both ways

So let's talk about accents for a bit, because I think especially in a country like Canada, which is very multicultural, and you have people from all different countries, they would say they speak English.

And I know people from countries that, their official language in that country is English, but how they speak English is different from the North American English. So, you know, a very common example of that would just be British or Australian. I actually had the privilege of traveling to Australia earlier this year, before corona happened.

And for the most part, I could understand what they were saying, but, you know, there were a couple of times I wanted to "close caption" [laughs] some of the people that I met with. Just cause, like, "I'm not really sure what that word - oh, OK. That's what you meant to say." So in the spirit of inclusion and acceptance, I mean, I was kind of struggling with this.

What's your thoughts on how much should people really be trying to change their accent to an American or Canadian setting or whatever country that they're in? Versus everyone around them also trying to do some work to understand their "accent" better?

Katie: Yeah, this is such, again, a complex and layered question that I love.

So on a very basic level, a lot of people, most of the folks who would call us to work on their accent, it's because *they* want to do it. Some - like when I first started, I did have a few folks who were

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referred by employers, but I think again, it's more sort of awareness of inclusion and equity has come around. It's like, "OK, maybe we shouldn't do that."

So at the most basic level, the first reason someone might want to do it is if they are frequently being misunderstood. Which is exhausting, both for the speaker and for the listener. And if it's because they're not a native speaker in that language, you know, they've already worked really hard to learn the language, and even though it is a lot of work, it's like, "OK, well I'm used to working on this language. And so now I'll just do this extra level just in the same way that I continue to learn vocabulary. I'm going to continue to refine the way that I pronounce things."

On the receiving end though - it's like, OK, but how much of that does the person have to do, or should the person have to do? And this is where it gets really really complicated and dicey and does tell you so much about the environment and the society that you're operating in.

So I remember, I did my undergraduate education at the University of Toronto and I majored in linguistics. And we had, I remember one of the professors in the department telling me... Or we had a guest lecturer, it was a new professor in the department who was an international professor as most of the teaching faculty at U of T are. And so they spoke English with a non-native accent, and I don't even remember what continent they were from, but that professor had previously worked in the United States at a university in, I think, Indiana.

And she was talking about how amazed she was when she came to Toronto. And she did have a pretty pronounced accent, and none of the students seem to care and it didn't seem to cause a problem at all. Because previously at the small school that she taught at in Indiana, she was just getting absolutely destroyed on her reviews because the students couldn't understand her, because of her accent.

And obviously there is a big demographic difference between the students at the University of Toronto and the students at a small university in Indiana. And maybe that's a bit mean to say, but I feel like living in the Midwest, I can say that [laughs].

So that's an example of, how much of it was the accent and how much of it was, you know, what are people used to hearing.

Now on the flip side, it is challenging for us to parse accents and things that we aren't familiar hearing. You know, think about if you have learned a second language, and when you first start learning that language, it's really hard for you to understand what people are saying. As you become more proficient in it, your ability to understand, your comprehension, improves.

And so, in a very diverse society, like in a city like Toronto, there'd be a very high expectation that people can process accents because you hear them all the time. There's so much linguistic diversity in Toronto. But if you go to a different part of the country where there isn't as much linguistic diversity, the people who live in that place, their brains, like, literally don't have the cells to process more diversity of language than what they hear on TV probably. So it is going to be harder.

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Something else I've heard with the clients that I work with here is - someone I'll talk with, and we might be the same age, and they clearly have an accent, but no problem from where I'm sitting. But they'll say, "I don't have a problem so much with my peers at work, but it's the senior executives that can't understand me."

And is it, well, those senior executives just aren't being as patient and they need to learn to be more open and understanding? Or is it that the hair cells in their ears are deteriorating and they literally physically don't have the ability to process, again, more diversity of signals or just signals that they aren't used to having? They're already having to work harder just to understand people with the same accent as them let alone someone different. So...you know...where do you make the judgment call there?

Rosie: OK. So - and I want to say something, for the sake of our listeners as well, who might be interpreting things a certain way, cause I'm pretty sure that's not what you mean. But what I'm hearing is, that there may actually be genuine biological reasons that make it difficult for someone to be able to understand someone with an accent different from theirs in English. Which is not an excuse to say that, well, they shouldn't try. Or, well then, the other person with that accent has to change.

But I guess in the spirit of inclusion, it is truly, well, it might really genuinely be harder for some people to be able to understand accents than for other people. Is that kind of a fair - would that be a fair summary of what you're saying?

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, I think both, I think we have to be just be aware that both things are true, right?

Rosie: OK.

Katie: So, you know, people absolutely need to work harder to understand speech patterns they're not as familiar with. Laziness, or "I haven't had to do this before", is not an excuse and not a reason to tell someone they need to change so that your life is easier.

On the flip side, I think to assume that a person who is saying, "I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time understanding you", is just because they're being lazy or just because they don't care... that is also, you know, making an assumption about someone that maybe could be a little bit kinder. Both things could be going on, right. The person might have more ability to learn and they could put in a little more work, but ultimately they may also be limited in some ways that are outside of their control.

Supporting each other at work

Rosie: Got it. OK. So you know, I think that actually is a good lead in to talking about how we can be supportive of each other. And primarily I think how - cause I do think, and you can correct me - but the proportion of people in, let's just say in the U.S. or in Canada, who have either a speech problem, or, I guess some kind of neurodiversity - that they might want to change. Or not, but they're just, it's just a diverse way of speaking, let's call it. That there's more, I guess, North American native English

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speakers that don't have speech problems than there are people - than are the opposite. Would that be true?

Katie: Yeah, you know - I mean on paper, yes. I think if you look at our statistical studies, I will certainly say, because I work with - the folks we work with, we call them subclinical sometimes. I think if a lot more people knew the variety of speech and language and communication diagnoses or disorders that are out there, a lot more people would realize, "Oh wait, I actually am not quite like everyone else. I am having a harder time." But we don't have studies of those people. So I think, yes, it's safe to say that the majority sort of has a standard way of doing things.

Rosie: OK, I think that's fair. Cause I would never have thought to come to you for help before, like when I was starting out at the firm and I was told, "speak louder, speak slower" and so forth. I would just like - To be honest, I would have been like, OK, well my performance is going to be affected if I don't do this. I have to do things the business way. And maybe that in itself is a whole other thing that needs to be discussed.

But OK, so if we assume that there is sort of the majority that everyone has tried to conform to, how can we be more understanding and supportive, for the people that are not necessarily in that majority or have been told, "Well, this isn't really working out for you", or they want to change something? What do you see works best from a coworker or from a community perspective?

Katie: Yeah, that is a great question. It's funny, cause on the one - like, part of me wants to take it in a really interesting and scientific and social theory directly.

Rosie: Yeah, go for it!

Katie: And then the other part of me is like, just be patient and listen more?

Which is, you know, in some of the different, disability communities I'm in, like, that's literally it, is like... Be willing to take a little extra time, because you know, maybe the person needs a little extra time to get their thoughts together or to have the words come out of their mouth. Or you know, maybe because something about the way they talk, or something about the way that you hear, or something in the middle of that, causes you to need to ask for clarification.

[gentle tone] That's OK. That can be okay.

So taking a little more time, being a little more patient.

Something else that I have found helpful, just from the work that I'm able to do. So a lot of the inclusion work that we do is going into companies and doing trainings on topics, intersecting with inclusion and communication. And a big part of what we do is teaching people about the science of communication, the different parameters of communication. So things like voice and articulation and how articulation of your physical sounds is different from the words that you're choosing. Those are two very different processes. And in each of these parameters, you can operate at a high level or a low level, or a lot of detail or a little bit of detail.

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And adjusting all these parameters has really different effects. I often use the analogy of a sound mixing board. You can dial things up and down. And when people start to understand, oh, it's not that so-and-so is a bad speaker, or so-and-so's a good speaker, or so-and-so's a powerful speaker. It's what is the individual parameter that person is tapping into and they're adjusting in a certain direction to create a certain effect.

I think that both empowers people to be more aware of why they're reacting to the way people talk, both either positively or negatively, in a certain direction. And also to have more patience for people who, maybe because of something that is sort of a biological process, they're going to be here on this parameter. But you can appreciate other things that they're doing in other areas to have the general effect that's being asked for.

So a lot of it, yeah, just sort of awareness, I suppose. Awareness, listening, patience.

The elusive "Executive Presence"

Rosie: OK. So maybe you have an example of, on the employer side... Cause I think you've got this unique perspective where you can hear from both the employer and the employee. Cause sometimes it'll be the employer who contacts you and says, "Hey, I would like you to work with my employee, Bob, on this."

So is there, I don't know... Is there maybe an example of that, where someone hasn't been as aware or as patient? They may think that they have, like they're very aware of what the problem is, and they've been so patient up to this point. But when you get into it, actually, that's not the case because they haven't been aware of *this*.

Yeah, is there an example of that you could share to help us understand?

Katie: Yeah. Let me try to think. Off the top of my head...

So I think, yeah, I do work in an interesting space where I get to see both sides. Because employers, when they're asking for things of their employees or they're giving performance reviews, and they'll give you the most useless feedback ever.

And they'll either say they want the employee to be doing something - well often they'll say they want them to be *more* something. There's this very subjective...whatever...right? Like, you know, you need to be more assertive. It's like... [huffs].

Rosie: Yeah. I've heard, "They need more executive presence". Whatever the heck that means!

Katie: Yes, exactly.

Rosie: Usually I think that means, "You need to be more like a white man", but...Yeah, I think that's what they mean by executive presence.

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Katie: Exactly. And so, executive presence, so I would say, "OK, so employer, what do you mean by that? And what is happening, what are you seeing happen that you think is because the person doesn't have enough executive presence?"

[imitating employer] "Well, you know, they're always getting talked over in meetings."

OK. So that's an interesting piece of information. And you know, I'll go with the employer's train of thought for a while. "So, what types of stuff, when are they talking? What types of conversations are happening and what is the moment at which they're getting talked over?"

And they'd be like, [imitating employer] "Well, you know, they're just giving information." And it might be, "They're too quiet."

I'm like, OK. So volume is something, that's a concrete piece of information for me.

Or, [imitating employer] "They just talk on and on."

And I'm like, Oh, OK. So maybe they're giving, they're just sort of going on and on. And actually the information they're giving isn't relevant.

Or, [imitating employer] "You know, they just do a really good job, but you know, their manager is just a really outspoken, impulsive person and they need to learn to handle that."

I'm like, well OK, well actually that sounds like the manager's the one I should be working with, not the employee. So it's a lot about asking questions to identify what is actually happening in these moments of communication, where I can start to identify and catalogue the behaviours, and are those behaviours that the employee can improve.

Because often there are some things like that, and often it is more junior employees were getting referred. And so it might be something like, OK, yeah, when you're presenting information, you are giving more than is necessary. So we're going to teach you how to pare down to just the key points so that you don't lose your listener's attention. That's a good skill to know.

But on the flip side, if it's cause you're, you just have a rude manager, who's always cutting you off and interrupting, maybe we need to talk to the manager directly. Or sometimes it can be self-advocacy. So a big strategy that we'll use is working with our individual clients on learning about communication and then, OK, how can we now give this information to the people that you work with? So that they're more aware of what's going on in a moment. And I realized you asked for a specific example and that's not really a specific example. I got a little, um, yeah.

Rosie: That's OK. No,I think those are some, that's probably more than one specific example, actually. So yeah, I think that's helpful. And maybe as our listeners are hearing this too, they can think of examples that they've encountered at work. And I welcome people to share and add in the comments too.

Like ,what is it that you've encountered where, you know, that's not really something that is my specific problem, or is even maybe my problem at all. But somebody wants me to change this. And this is actually just a part of who I am.

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I know I've I had to go through even getting to a place of like, what's OK for me. So I'm short, and I used to wear heels, but at some point, it's like...They don't make me feel comfortable, and I'm tired of doing it really just to make myself taller for other people. I'm not - I can't wear one foot high inch heels, right?

And I can only talk so loudly because my lungs are only so big, so... I'm sure that if I worked with you, Katie, there'd probably be other techniques you could teach me that I could project a bit more. But at the end of the day, I'd rather just hold a mic and not have to, like, shout, because that doesn't feel comfortable, and that's not going to make me a good presenter either.

Katie: Yeah.

Supporting each other by not labelling each other

Rosie: So, yeah, I think, something I'm hearing too as to how I can be supportive of other people is to not jump and put labels on things right away. Like, not say, "you're too quiet" or "you're too loud". But to put a little bit more context, think about the person's, even, size and physiology. And you know, is this even something that's necessary for me to change? Is there something I can adapt?

And also is if there is something that would be more helpful to the person for their success? And I don't mean, you know, "rising up the ladder" success. But just for them to be heard better. Then what is the actual action or behavior that we think would be helpful? Not a label or kind of a stereotype that we put on them.

Katie: Yeah. And I think that example you gave of your own personal experience is really great as well. Because that speaks to flexibility and honouring the individual values of the speaker, right? So in the example you gave, the functional issue was not being heard. So people in the room want to hear you, and you want to be heard by other people. Someone who tells you, "You're too quiet", they're putting that label on you and making it all about you.

And you're saying, OK, well so maybe yes, there's something about my voice that it can't quite carry to the back of a 500 person room. But there are - so yes, I could go to work with some vocal specialists and do all kinds of exercises and practice to be louder. Or, I could use a microphone. And that is your choice to make, because both of those will be just as effective.

And for the people that you work with, to be able to say, "I would like to use a microphone when I speak, I find that's helpful for myself and the audience." Versus someone telling you, "You need to go change this particular thing in this particular way."

Rosie: Mmm. OK, that's - that's really affirming.

And, I hope that employers out there would also be understanding of that. To be able to say, well, if we need a microphone for someone, it's not really any different from needing a button on the door, right? For someone who's in a wheelchair and can't open the door themselves. Like, how can we be accommodating to make our employees as successful as possible, and feel as valued and welcome as possible in the workplace? So I'm glad that you think that that's actually a good example.

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Closing thoughts

Katie, this has been so interesting and enjoyable for me. I've learned a lot. I could go on and on forever, but you've already been so generous with your time. I really appreciate you coming on the show and just sharing some of these perspectives that certainly I don't get to see every day.

Thank you for changing my lens and hopefully the lenses of our listeners. That's definitely the goal of this podcast.

So before we go, or before we let you go, any particular closing thoughts? Or, you know, what's most prevalent on your heart right now? If there's any final thought that you wanted to leave us with, or any final action you wanted us to take, what would that be?

Katie: Ooh, such a big question.

Rosie: [laughs] No pressure!

Katie: And I feel like, asking that question at the end of a particular conversation, my answer to that will change at every top of the hour, every hour today.

I think, maybe carry on some themes from this conversation. I think, maybe just understanding and really reflecting on the value of flexibility. I think what's challenging about an inclusion in a workplace context is, we do have all these different people with individual needs coming together. Certainly there are power structures and historical reasons that, you know, have privileged certain groups, and given a lot of power to certain groups, and violently taken power away from other groups.

With something like communication, where I think communication is so foundational to so many of these inclusion issues that get talked about, but it's kind of in the background. And so, as more and more conversations are being had about these really, you know, important and like giant issues, like race and gender... Some of the *how* of how we get to navigating those and start to repair and restore some of those relationships is going to be about communication. And there's a lot more to the communication part than I think people realize sometimes.

So I think... willing to be generous and to really pay attention in a particular moment to what is actually happening; to who is doing what; and who is thinking what. You know, communication is a skill that you never finish, right? Like, it's one of those things that you're never done. You can, all of us, myself included right, we can always improve on it and will be improving on it, and evolving and changing throughout our life.

And as we strive to be inclusive, we're all paying attention to how we want things to change and other people to change, but we're going to change as well. And that doesn't necessarily mean that we're giving into problematic structures that we're trying to overturn. It can be a process of self-discovery.

So that was a little, not as concise as I wanted it to be, but I'll stop there.

Rosie: Thank you. That's some great thoughts to leave us with, to reflect on as we go from here, so really appreciate that. Really appreciate your time again, Katie. And just a reminder for everyone is

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listening to this podcast, that if you want to find out more and learn more about communication, speech, or just about Katie and all the great work that she does, you can find her on her website, which is speechIRL.com.

And if you are like me, who's not really with it - "IRL" stands for "in real life". So speechIRL.com. And then you can also find them on all the usual social media outlets, Facebook and Twitter. And I think on their blog, you have a - sorry, on your website you have a blog. Katie, what are some of the things that you talk about in your blog?

Katie: Yeah, we're kind of all over the place, much like the work that we do. Some of our topics are very communication centric. I think this week, or this month, we had a piece on how to have small talk, which is a very popular, I would say, "lesson" that we do with our clients is, you know, people hate small talk and that's pretty normal, but it's a pretty formulaic thing to do if you know the formula. So we put that up there.

And then we also have articles about things more related to diversity and inclusion, equity. And how to have - but from a communication standpoint. So you know, how to say the right thing in 2020. Or how to not say the wrong thing in 2020. And then things about speech pathology as well, if there's any folks interested in that field, or sort of that area of practice.

So, yeah. Take a gander!

Rosie: Very cool. I need to read that small talk one, cause I hate it as well. I've learned it out of necessity. I don't even know if I've learned it, but I need to do it, so I will definitely check that out.

Katie: Yeah, we actually have postcards we made that are the Small Talk Menu. It's literally like, if you were going to a wedding and you're like, "Oh, I'm going to have to small talk with people I don't know."

Rosie: Oh yeah!

Katie: And it's like, it's literally on a postcard. It's like, "How to have a small talk conversation and keep it going." Cause it's literally that formulaic and people don't realize it. And once you sort of realize the formula and that it's just a game, you just keep the game wherever you're going.

Rosie: Wow...OK, well, once we're all released from our coronavirus prisons and we have to go to the 300 person weddings again, I am definitely printing that out and taking that with me. Thanks for that!

[laughs]

Katie: Yes, cause we'll all have lost our small talk skills cause we haven't been mingling for like, three years.

Rosie: [laughs] That's right, we won't know how to talk to strangers anymore. We can only talk to five people at a time. That's right.

Thanks so much, Katie. It was a pleasure having you here. I really enjoyed our chat and I learned a lot. So thank you.

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Katie: Thank you so much, Rosie.

Outro

[outro music plays]

Rosie: Thanks for joining us – I hope today's episode helped to change your lens and expand your worldview. If you enjoyed listening, please rate and subscribe to Changing Lenses, available wherever you get your favourite podcasts. For more about how I'm changing my lens, please check out my website at changinglenses.ca. You'll also find the shownotes and transcripts for each episode, and you can leave comments or questions, or send me a message – I would love to hear from you!

I'm Rosie Yeung, inviting you to join me for the next episode of Changing Lenses. Until then, take care!

[Outro music ends]

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