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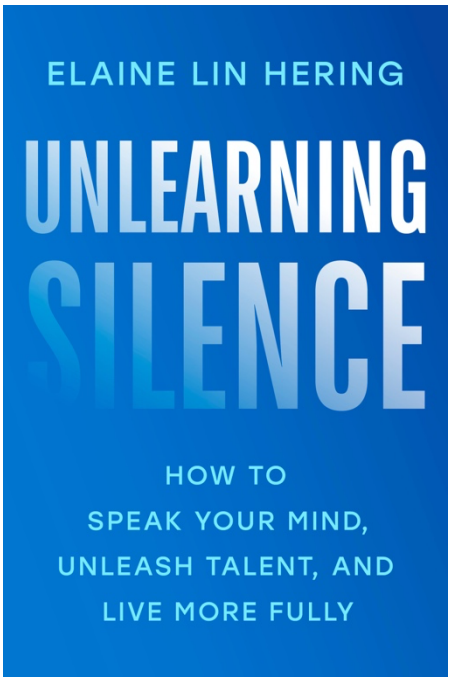
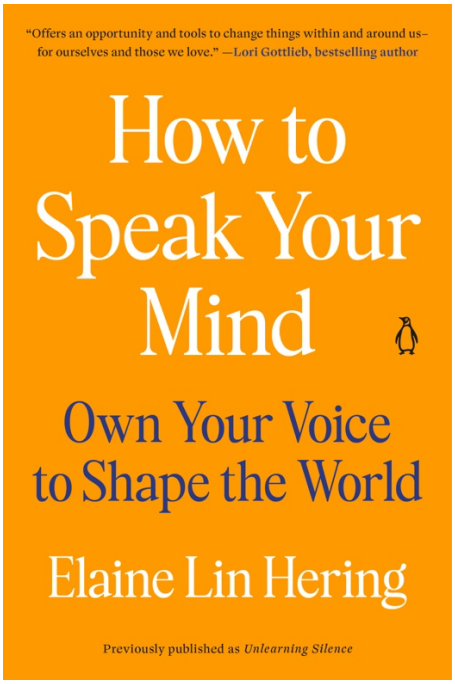
# ELAINE LIN HERING




Penguin Random House | USA Today Bestseller | Translated into 10 Languages

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

### Having a seat at the table doesn’t mean your voice is actually welcome.

We've all been there. You're presenting a new idea at work when a colleague talks over you, taking all the credit. You're at the dinner table when someone makes a comment you can't let slide. You share your opinion and you're told it's not your place, that you're "too much." These moments leave us feeling frustrated and powerless—and they raise a fair question: why speak up if you know it won't be received well, and might even make things worse?

Most books about speaking your mind tell you to speak up louder, better, clearer, more confidently. They target the symptom. Hering targets the root cause. Why don’t people speak up? And what can we do about it? She illuminates that silence isn't a personality flaw or a confidence deficit—it's a learned behavior. We have all been taught, in ways subtle and explicit, that silence is safer, smarter, and more socially acceptable than speaking.

Hering defines silence as "the withholding of self for the comfort and convenience of others." That definition allows teams, organizations, and individuals to tackle the challenge without blame.

Drawing on real-life examples and a concrete, compassionate roadmap, Hering teaches readers how to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, recognize unconscious patterns that shape how they show up in any room, and identify the ways they may be inadvertently silencing the people around them. The result is a practical guide to using your voice — and to shaping the relationships, teams, and communities you're part of.

Only by unlearning silence and finding our voice can we more fully unleash talent, speak our minds, and become more complete versions of ourselves—and help other people do the same.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Publisher: Penguin Random House / Penguin Life
- Publication: March 19, 2024 | Hardcover, Audiobook, E-book
- Paperback: December 28, 2026, retitled *How to Speak Your Mind: Own Your Voice to Shape the World*
- USA Today Bestseller. A Next Big Idea Club Must Read. Porchlight Best Human Behavior & Personal Development Book of the Year
- Translated into 10 languages: Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, German, Korean, Dutch, Thai, UK English; Arabic and Simplified Chinese in progress
- The first commercial book written on the subject of silence
- Available at all major retailers and independent bookstores

## WHY SILENCE? WHY NOW?

Most organizations are drowning in unspoken truths. Leaders are not failing to speak—they are choosing not to. Employees are not lacking confidence—they are calculating risk. The costs show up as missed innovation, failed initiatives, toxic cultures, and people who leave long before they resign.

The conventional response—telling people to "speak up"—has not worked. It cannot work, because it misdiagnoses the problem. Speaking up is not the gap. The gap is silence that has been taught, modeled, rewarded, and designed.

Elaine Lin Hering spent years inside some of the world's most consequential rooms—Harvard Law School, global C-suites, mediation tables, and cross-cultural negotiation settings across six continents. What she saw, again and again, was not a shortage of smart people with good ideas. It was an abundance of people who had learned that speaking was not worth the cost and relationships that made voice too costly.

Unlearning Silence is the diagnostic and the roadmap. It names the mechanisms of silence and offers a concrete path forward—for the individual who has been holding back, and for the leader who has been, often without realizing it, closing the door.

## 5 KEY IDEAS EVERY INTERVIEWER SHOULD KNOW

### 1. Silence is learned—not inherent.

No one is born silent. Silence is the accumulated result of experiences, consequences, and feedback that taught us it was safer to stay quiet. That means it can be unlearned.

### 2. The advice "speak up" targets the wrong problem.

Courage and confidence are not what's missing. What's missing is a clear-eyed accounting of how silence operates—within, between, and around us. Telling someone to speak up without changing the conditions that made silence rational doesn't work.

### 3. We all silence others—often without knowing it.

Silence is not only something that happens to us. It is something we do. Well-meaning, compassionate, genuinely inclusive leaders and family members silence people every day. Chapter 5 covers nine ways we silence others even when we don't intend.

### 4. Silence operates at three levels: self, social, and systemic.

Hering's framework maps silence across three distinct levels. The self—the ways we silence our own needs and desires. The social—the interpersonal dynamics that suppress or permit voice. The systemic—the policies and practices that support some and not others. Real change requires working at all three.

### 5. Voice isn't just what you say in a meeting.

Voice is how you move through the world. Impact comes from our actions, behaviors, choices, and contributions to the world. Discerning where you want to invest your time, energy, gifts, and talents *is* using your voice because none of us have unlimited resources.

## SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These questions are offered as a starting point. Elaine brings depth, specificity, and personal story to each of them. Feel free to adapt based on your audience.

### FRAMING THE BOOK

**Isn't silence sometimes a good thing?**

Silence has utility and we each can be rewarded for it. But the difference between silence that is strategic and additive or damaging and oppressive is agency. Is silence something you choose, or something that is chosen for you? For more, see Chapter 3: When Silence Makes Sense

**Who is this book for?**

Anyone who has ever chosen their words too carefully, swallowed something they wish they'd said, or wondered why the people around them seem to hold back. And anyone in leadership who has ever wondered why their team—or family member—isn't more forthcoming. Which is, in Elaine's experience, almost everyone.

**Of all the things you could have written about, how did you come to focus on silence specifically?**

Elaine spent more than a decade teaching frameworks for negotiation, difficult conversations, and feedback developed out of the Harvard Negotiation Project. She saw the limits of those frameworks first hand. Silence undercuts even the best intentions and efforts to develop people. Unlearning silence is the path to unlocking those other skills—and living more fully.

### INSIDE THE BOOK

**You make the case that silence is learned, not inherent. What are the conditions that teach people it's safer to stay quiet?**

The lessons come early and are rarely explicit. A child who speaks up and gets ignored learns to stop. An employee who flags a problem and gets managed out learns the calculus of risk. The conditions that teach silence are often the same conditions that claim to value voice—which is part of what makes them so hard to see and so hard to change.

**What's the difference between strategic silence and the kind of silence that slowly erodes someone's sense of self?**

Strategic silence is chosen and comes from a place of agency—in service of something the person values: timing, relationship, effect. The kind Elaine is most concerned with is the kind that isn't chosen so much as defaulted to, where the calculation has become so automatic the person no longer even registers it as a choice.

**What does it look like when a well-meaning, genuinely compassionate leader is still inadvertently silencing people?**

Silence people can look like expecting people to talk a certain way, asking for input after the decision has already been made, holding a fixed mindset, or even simply being present at a meeting. The leaders most likely to be silencing people are often the ones most certain they're not—because they would never do it on purpose.

**Can you say more about the difference between having a seat at the table and having a voice that's actually welcome?**

Having a seat means you are in the room. Your voice being welcome means that it's heard, considered, doesn't need to be filtered, and capable of changing something. There is a lot of space between those two things, and a lot of organizations are congratulating themselves for closing a gap they have only barely begun to close.

**What does it actually take to unlearn silence?**

Awareness and action, which also happen to be the two parts of the book. The problem has so long been misdiagnosed as a confidence or courage problem. We cannot heal what we cannot see. Understanding how silence works allows the opportunity to make difference choices. If silence isn't serving who we are and who we're becoming, we have the power to choose a different way.

**What's your vision for the world and how do we get there?**

A world in which people are respected for who they are, regardless of their background, wiring, or job title. Where we're able to listen across differences and honor the humanity in each other. We get there by unlearning the ways we silence ourselves and lowering the costs to other people doing the same.

## PERSONAL & REFLECTIVE

**You have a Harvard Law background and spent years at a global leadership firm. What did those rooms teach you about silence?**

They taught her that silence is not just a personal struggle—it is a system that benefits some people more than others. The most elite rooms in the world are not exempt from silence. In some ways, the stakes make it worse.

**How have you navigated your own silence? What did you learn the hard way?**

Elaine spent years being who others wanted or expected her to be. It served her well. It led to reasonable professional success. But it was also what got in the way of her using her own voice, shaping the world, and living a fulfilling life. She learned that using your voice can be costly, but is also completely worth it – and possible.

**If one chapter in Unlearning Silence was required reading for every leadership course, which would it be and why?**

The chapter on how we silence others. Because most leadership development focuses on the individual's own voice, and misses the more urgent question: what are you doing, right now, that is making it harder for the people around you to use theirs?

# TALKING POINTS

## WORKPLACE & LEADERSHIP

- Why it's so hard to speak up at work—and how to find your voice
- How to ask for what you want—a raise, a promotion, time off—at work
- How to use your social capital to speak up for others
- How women and marginalized groups continue to be silenced—and how to change the narrative
- How leaders silence people without intending to—and what to do about it
- Why unlearning silence should be a core leadership competency for cultures of innovation and inclusion
- How silence creates groupthink and perpetuates pay inequity

## PERSONAL & SOCIETAL

- Why silence contributes to social isolation
- Why keeping quiet is making you sick—the health costs of silence
- The difference between chosen silence and silence that slowly erodes the self
- How holding your tongue to keep the peace at home might be making it worse
- How to teach our children to use their voices
- Why silence is a survival strategy for some—and what systemic change actually looks like

## PRAISE FOR UNLEARNING SILENCE

*"A necessary read. With empathy and clarity, Elaine unpacks what makes it so hard to honor ourselves and talk with each other. Unlearning Silence offers an opportunity and tools to change things within and around us—for ourselves and those we love."*
**—Lori Gottlieb, New York Times bestselling author of Maybe You Should Talk to Someone**

*"Unlearning Silence is the book I wish I had when I started my career. Hering not only proves why silence is toxic, but goes a step further and shows us how to speak up in a way that is safe, values aligned, and has the greatest chance of being impactful."*
**—Pooja Lakshmin MD, psychiatrist & bestselling author of Real Self-Care**

*"We can't solve the world's most pressing problems—and innovate our way into the future—if we perpetually silence ourselves and others. Elaine turns conventional, inadequate advice to 'just speak up' into actionable and effective strategies. A game changer for teams and leaders everywhere."*
**—Dorie Clark, Wall Street Journal bestselling author of The Long Game, Executive Education Faculty, Columbia Business School**

*"Whether we have been socialized to keep quiet, punished for speaking up, or feel panic at the prospect of voicing our truth, our silence deprives the workplace and the world of our ideas and crucial contributions. Elaine Lin Hering's book provides the secret recipe for breaking silence once and for all."*
**—W. Brad Johnson, PhD, Professor of Leadership, Ethics, and Law, U.S. Naval Academy, coauthor of Good Guys**

*"Too often as women, we are told we are the problem. Books tell us to just be more confident. Elaine goes deeper and shows us that the silence we've been indoctrinated by runs deep and it is what holds us back."*
**—Deepa Purushothaman, author of The First, The Few, The Only**

*"This is a clear, compassionate read, and an important one. Creativity and innovation flow when people know how to use their voices, and leaders learn how to notice and disrupt patterns of silencing."*
**—Katherine Sarafian, Academy Award®-winning film producer**

## ABOUT ELAINE LIN HERING

Elaine Lin Hering is a speaker, facilitator, and former Lecturer on Law at Harvard Law School. She works with organizations and individuals to build skills in communication, collaboration, and conflict management. She has worked on six continents and facilitated executive education at Harvard, Dartmouth, Tufts, UC Berkeley, and UCLA.

She has served as the Advanced Training Director for the Harvard Mediation Program and a Managing Partner for a global leadership development firm. Her clients include American Express, Chevron, Google, Nike, Novartis, PayPal, Pixar, and the Red Cross. She was named a Thinkers50 global management thinker to watch.

*Unlearning Silence: How to Speak Your Mind, Unleash Talent, and Live More Fully* (Penguin Random House) is her first book. It is a USA Today Bestseller, a Porchlight Best Human Behavior & Personal Development Book of the Year, a Next Big Idea Club Must Read, and the first commercial book written on the subject of silence.

## ELAINE AS A SPEAKER

Elaine has trained over 350,000 leaders globally across six continents. She brings the same rigor and warmth to the stage that she brings to the page—grounding every talk in research, real-world examples, and a genuine belief that change is possible.

Her keynotes and workshops are available to corporations, universities, nonprofits, and conferences. Topics include:

- Unleashing Your Team's Talent
- Communication and Collaboration in High-Stakes Environments
- Making Feedback Work
- Own Your Voice

## SELECTED MEDIA & PRESS

Elaine has been featured in and by: Harvard Business Review, Forbes, Fortune, Bloomberg, Inc., Fast Company, NPR, Katie Couric Media, McKinsey & Company, Next Big Idea Club, 10% Happier with Dan Harris, Rotman Management Magazine, TEDx.

She has guested in 100+ podcast episodes, available in this playlist.

## NOTE ON THE PAPERBACK EDITION

A paperback edition will publish on December 28, 2026 under a new title: *How to Speak Your Mind: Own Your Voice to Shape the World*.

The new title is designed to welcome readers who may not yet be ready to engage with the language of silence—while the book itself remains the same essential, practical, paradigm-shifting guide.

## CONTACT & BOOKING

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