

# Say More About That...

And Other Ways to

**Speak Up,**

**Push Back,**

and **Advocate**

for Yourself and Others

**AMBER CABRAL**

WILEY

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## Praise for *Say More About That...*

“With this book, Amber Cabral delivers another timely gem. She is a gifted communicator, bringing concepts and techniques that are relatable and actionable. Now you can have her as a coach and advisor, too.”

—Mark Breitbard, President and CEO, Global Gap Brand

“There is no one more qualified than Amber Cabral to teach on speaking up for yourself. I remember seeing Amber speaking at an inclusion summit for the first time. I was stunned. After working in corporate America for over a decade before starting my own company, I'd seen a lot, but her approach was refreshing, honest, and genuine. The room was mesmerized. Top executives were there taking notes! Presidents of Fortune 500 companies have shared the difference Amber has made in their lives and their business culture. This book, *Say More About That*, is a must-read.”

—Brandice N. Daniel, CEO and Founder, Harlem's Fashion Row

“Amber Cabral's book *Say More About That...And Other Ways to Speak Up, Push Back, and Advocate for Yourself and Others* will do for you what meeting Amber and learning from her has done for me: help you understand the importance of having a voice and influencing change through inclusive and equitable behaviors. Her real-life examples and pragmatic approach to such a challenging topic will leave you with practical skills to be courageous and speak up on topics that matter.”

—Brandy Sislow, Chief Human Resources Officer, Kendra Scott

“As a leading voice in the inclusion space, Amber continues to push the envelope to ensure that her books truly help people to realize their authentic selves. Her writing forces the reader to take a look not only *at* themselves but also deep *within* themselves. Amber never talks over you and instead speaks directly to you while also sharing her own journey to enlightenment. Speaking up is truly a skill that can be learned, and this book will help the reader to understand what that skill looks like so they can take meaningful action for themselves and others.”

—Reginald J. Miller, VP, Global Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer, McDonald's

“*Say More About That* puts a spotlight on the importance of being part of the solution and using your position of privilege to advocate for those who do not have the same access. What makes Amber brilliant is her ability to simplify and effectively communicate complex issues. Her straightforward and practical advice on how you can foster a more equitable and inclusive culture has helped me gain useful perspectives I did not have before.”

—Jyothi Rao, CEO, Intermix

“Continuing to share her wisdom and experience in this volume, Amber Cabral definitively proves that she is a consummate DEI professional. But rather than dispense theoretical thought leadership, Amber's strategic approach is delivered through impactful anecdotes and easy-to-follow instructions. Reading this, as well as her previous book, *Allies and Advocates*, is like having a good friend counsel you through challenging conversations both professionally and personally. Get copies for friends, family, and colleagues. They, and you, will be better for it.”

—Lydia Dishman, Staff Editor, *Fast Company*



# **Say More About That ...**

**And Other Ways to Speak Up, Push  
Back, and Advocate for Yourself and  
Others**

**AMBER CABRAL**

**WILEY**

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*For Pammy*

*You get a choice: How do you want your life to feel?*

## **Content Warning**

This book covers subject matter and uses examples for learning purposes that some folks may find discriminatory, frustrating, uncomfortable, or microaggressive. I have tried to be as responsible and thoughtful as possible in covering identity-related content in this book because I want this to be a useful resource to help people to communicate. Also, given the speed at which the inclusion and equity space changes and the speed that information moves at these days, it is possible that some content or framing in this book may fall into or out of favor by the time you read it. I am subject to error, bias, and plain old poor judgment, so although I tried my very best to be responsible, respectful, and compassionate in my delivery, there may be some places in this book where I missed the mark. My hope is that you are able to find value, resource, and relief in these pages and are also able to grant grace to me in the spaces where I fall short on anticipating your needs as a reader.

## Foreword

When I started my business in the late aughts, I quickly realized how critical speaking up to defend myself and enforce my boundaries would be to my ultimate success. Whether I needed to speak up to negotiate for more money or enforce contract terms to avoid scope creep, I learned early on how challenged I was without that natural ability. I'm not proud to admit that I passed up clients, projects, and key business relationships all because I lacked the tools to advocate for myself and my needs. It was easier to just let some opportunities go, even if I didn't want to. But how did I get so woefully skilled at staying silent?

Upon reflection, I can see how the societal, cultural, and family contexts in which I was raised all played a part. I came of age in the eighties and nineties, in an America where women were expected to acquiesce; where daring to ask questions or voice an unpopular opinion undermined your likability. But I also grew up Black, where dissent could get you labeled angry or difficult and undermine your prospects for upward mobility. And beyond all that, I grew up in a Black southern Christian home where girls like me were expected to defer to their elders at all costs. If you chose to question an adult's authority in the family or church you were labeled "disrespectful," and in some cases that label undermined your physical safety.

Against this backdrop, I was an unusually smart and intellectually curious Black girl growing up in the South. I constantly had questions that needed answers, but being repeatedly shut down when my innocent need to know made others feel tired or inconvenienced certainly discouraged my desire to speak up.

I learned early on that sometimes my mind moved faster than my mouth should; that, in consideration of others, I should stifle the urge to voice the questions, concerns, or protests that came so naturally to me. It's a learning you get in different ways and from different people, but a lesson that, whether explicitly stated or subtly implied, ultimately comes through crystal clear: *shut up*.

I heard, intimated, or physically felt that phrase so early and often in my life, I can't even remember the point when I let it seep deep inside, redefining my style of response. But I distinctly remember the feeling of being small, brown, and powerless. Even more, I distinctly remember how meaningless it felt to have things to say or share because no one with power cared enough to hear me out. Or worse, because of their power, if they didn't want to hear what I had to say they could silence me with an icy stare.

So at some point along the way, I muted my own voice. At those pivotal life stages when you're supposed to be building the muscle to speak up for yourself or advocate for others, I unknowingly let mine grow weak from disuse. And I'm not the only one. When faced with a situation that required a quick comeback, or the words to set someone straight, I'd freeze. My mind would race, trying to identify my argument as well as the words to make it, but never in enough time to seize the moment and salvage the situation. I'd feel a range of emotions depending on the situation and size of the audience who may have witnessed my silence - from irritated and angry to humiliated and embarrassed that I'd let the moment pass without saying what needed to be said.

After steadily building a business helping high-achieving professionals create visibility around their gifts, I learned I wasn't alone in my loss for words. When witnessing legions of talented, accomplished professionals - the majority of



them Black women – struggle to speak up and put themselves out there, I saw the other side of the visibility coin. Because they'd been socialized like me to *be good girls and stay quiet*, many of my clients found that the act of making noise about who they were and what they had to offer required practice. Like mine, their muscles for speaking up – in this case about themselves and their skills – had never been given the chance to develop.

It was truly a revelation then to meet Amber Cabral at a conference in 2015. After connecting briefly, she became a client; we went on to work together, and eventually became good friends. But from the moment we connected, I saw a rare and unique quality absent in me and many of the women I coach. Amber was not at all afraid to speak up. This woman was not one to be messed with! Instead of shrinking back from an uncomfortable conversation, Amber would puff up and speak up. Instead of simply going along to keep the peace or spare someone else's feelings, Amber was willing to disrupt the status quo if that meant rightness and justice would prevail.

At the heart of this I came to understand was her authenticity – she had that rare inability to be duplicitous. If she disagreed, felt something was unfair, or noticed someone being taken advantage of, she wouldn't let it slide. She was always ready to call out bad behavior and hold people accountable for their actions, no matter what. And Amber never seemed to worry if people wouldn't like her; she would speak up anyway. Ironically, I think she won more friends because of that.

Also at the heart of this willingness was her passion for fairness. It's no surprise she's built a wildly successful business teaching organizations how to make things more equitable, more fair for everyone. This passion and appetite for fairness drives her business, but, at a more essential

level, drives that part of her that will speak up for you even when you can't.

At first, I thought Amber was “lucky” to somehow always instinctively know when and how to speak up productively. But the more I hung around her, the more I realized it's a skill that anyone can develop with practice.

As a coach, I've had the honor of witnessing her gifts and teaching her some new skills. But as is the case with my best clients, I've had the opportunity to learn more from her than I could have ever imagined. Beyond her clear gift for diversity equity and inclusion strategy, Amber is truly a genius at crafting the credible comeback that will reposition you, take back your power, and shift the dynamic of an encounter. She has a gift for giving you language to be brave when you know you should say something but aren't quite sure what that something is. The process isn't always pretty, but it's a skill you should always be able to access when you need it.

I've witnessed, supported, and worked with hundreds of high achievers along my journey and never have I met someone so in command of their ability to advocate for themselves and others. I have been Amber's coach turned friend, and she has personally given me language to maintain my boundaries or hold others accountable for their bad behavior. And sometimes, she's just plain spoken up on my behalf, which is what any good advocate does.

On more than one occasion she's given me language to speak up for myself. Whether it was telling me what to say to a doctor who was dismissing my concerns about my son's asthma medication, or helping me craft a response to a lowball offer from a new corporate client, she's repeatedly given me the words to say to help me feel seen and heard. I count on her to give me scripts to ensure an equitable outcome when I'm not the one in the position of

power. I'm thrilled she was generous enough to write this book so she could share them with you, too.

When George Floyd was murdered at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, a community of bystanders looked on. Even fellow officers who had more institutional power to intervene and save a life did not. I sometimes wonder whether Derek Chauvin's fellow officers thought to speak up at any point during the over eight minutes Chauvin's knee pressed the life out of Floyd's dying body. Would they have intervened if they had known what to do? Would they have said something if only they'd known what to say to diffuse the situation?

Just a few weeks prior to me writing these words, a young woman boarded a subway train and was assaulted in front of her fellow passengers. When the perpetrator sat down beside her and groped at her sexually despite her protests for 40 minutes, no one spoke up and came to her aid. Instead the other passengers filmed the incident.

Why?

These days, it seems that instead of speaking up to stop unlawful or unfair acts from occurring, our collective reflex is to grab our smartphones and film what we see. Whether this video evidence is leading to more justice is debatable, but one thing is certain: wrongdoers are emboldened by silence. When we see something and don't say something, we are in some ways complicit; our silence gives bad behavior the oxygen it needs to persist.

I fear this new tendency to record instead of speak up sets a dangerous precedent for women, people of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, and neurodivergent folks who have always been more vulnerable to harassment and physical attack. I fear for my infant daughter growing up in a world in which

you could be raped on a subway train while a dozen other people watch on. I fear for my teen sons who could be killed at the hands of a police officer whose colleagues won't speak up and intervene to prevent a murder.

But my fear is tempered with hope, as I assume yours is or else you wouldn't be holding this book. Where so many of us shrink in fear or freeze and lose access to our words, Amber has hers within reach and is willing to bravely use them at all times. And an even greater gift is that she's willing to share a bit of her magic and show us how to do the same.

Amber and the events of our society have shown me that the muscle to speak up is not an optional one to cultivate – it's critical. When we find ourselves facing off against those who make it a common practice to abuse their power, “I didn't know what to say ...” is no longer a reasonable excuse. We must intentionally build the muscle to speak up; sometimes life is literally on the line.

In some ways, I selfishly encouraged Amber to write this book because it was the manual I always needed. In many ways, this book is for me.

But I know I am not the only one who struggles with knowing what to say in heated situations, and even the tricky exchanges of everyday life. And I know how much having the right words at your disposal can give you the confidence to push back and speak up – even when it may be more comfortable to stay silent.

To those who were taught not to “meddle” but often feel called to use their privilege for the sake of someone else, this book is for you.

To those who are tired of feeling ill-equipped to negotiate, set a boundary, call out bad behavior, or stand up to people in positions of power, this book is for you.

To those who were silenced so much early on that self-silencing also became the norm, this book is for you, too. This book is for us. It's not too late to unmute ourselves. Using the tools in this book, we can build a new muscle. We can reclaim our power to speak up for ourselves, for others, for when it matters the most.

For all the times we've seen something, said nothing, and regretted staying silent, we finally have the words.

*Amanda Miller Littlejohn*  
*Writer, executive branding coach, and founder of Package*  
*Your Genius Academy*

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# Introduction

What a time to be alive. No matter when you are reading this book, likely you are experiencing some kind of changes and shifts such that a book about pushing back is even on your radar. I am so glad you are here! We all need the skill to push back and appropriately challenge. It is indeed essential to getting what we need and want in our lives. Doing it isn't easy, though, and since it is something I work with clients on regularly, I thought it might be useful to collect some of the most common ideas and tactics in one place for anyone to reference.

I am writing this in 2021, following the unforgettable year, 2020, when dual pandemics swept the globe: the COVID-19 viral pandemic and a race, identity, and social justice pandemic after the widely publicized murder of George Floyd. These two major events called everything into question, from how we work, to how we communicate, to how we understand identity. Conversations about identity, race, and politics became more commonplace, but also more complex. In an attempt to provide some guidance and support for what would turn out to be the start of a massive culture shift, I wrote my first book, titled *Allies and Advocates: Creating an Inclusive and Equitable Culture*, which released at the end of 2020. Allyship and advocacy were suddenly topics everyone wanted to understand as folks came to grips with the fallout after the murder of George Floyd and the desire to show up for marginalized and oppressed people came with questions like “How do I serve as an ally?” I wrote *Allies and Advocates* as an answer to that question. The book takes an exploratory walk through terminology common to the inclusion and equity space and through definitions, activities, and real-

world examples, helps folks understand what steps are necessary to be an ally and an advocate. It's a great place to start if you are new to the inclusion and equity space.

In the time since the release of *Allies and Advocates*, I have started to notice some new trends in the inclusion and equity space. Most notably, while some have felt more empowered to speak up and try to serve as allies and advocates for themselves, their communities, and people experiencing oppression, others have slunk to the false safety of silence, snarky comments, and data consumption without taking any real-world action. The latter isn't just unhelpful, it's problematic. Inclusion and equity work is an ongoing series of behavior and mindset shifts that move our culture forward over time. Either you are on board or you are an obstacle. If you are on board you should expect to be in a perpetual state of learning, growing, taking feedback, and evolving your perspectives and behaviors as to what inclusion and equity mean in modern times. Being on board means recognizing there is not a destination, there is not a good enough, there is always, always a way to be better – a better ally, a more inclusive leader, an advocate for someone, a learner, a teacher, a partner in ensuring equitable experiences are accessible for an all that is always evolving.

If we want inclusion to stop being a hypothetical and mythical place to aspire to, we have to be willing to activate it in the real world. In this follow-up to *Allies and Advocates*, I hope to help you see how your learnings apply to real-life, day-to-day interactions. This book is full of examples that have been plucked from reality. Where *Allies and Advocates* was an introductory and instructional guidebook aiming to transfer foundational knowledge and to define the basics of allyship, advocacy and being inclusive, *Say More About That ... And Other Ways to Speak Up, Push Back, and Advocate for Yourself and Others* is the



practicum, where you learn by doing. This book will have plenty of questions to consider and tactics to employ, but the approach in this book is geared more toward working your muscles around inclusion, rather than affirming the core knowledge essential to being an ally and an advocate. Speaking up is a muscle.

## **My Story - How'd I Get So Good at Speaking Up?**

Usually after someone witnesses me pushing back about something, they ask me how I got so good at doing it. It is funny because I don't even think much about it; I just do it. Who we are truly is a combination of our life experiences, and honestly, with my upbringing, a lot of times I had to speak up or go without. I also always was concerned about fairness, even as a child. I wanted the same things everyone else had. I didn't like when I got less of anything because I was a girl or younger or smaller or whatever arbitrary measure folks used, so I learned early to challenge and question.

The first time I remember deliberately challenging something was when I was in grade school. I always struggled with the letter “z” because it was the only letter that didn't have an ascender or descender (like letters “b” or “j”) that opened facing the opposite direction of the other letters. Letters “e,” “r,” and, probably most notably, “s” all opened facing the same direction. It made no sense that “z” went the other way. Even when I would be reading and come across a z, it looked backward to me. So, at some point, before first grade, I started writing them the opposite way; the way they looked correct to me. I was a pretty good student and had good grades, and teachers would just circle my z's to show me they were wrong. I hardly ever lost points for it – until about halfway through

second grade. My teacher literally told me one day, "This homework deserves an A, and I am going to give you an A this time, but the next time I see a backwards z in your work, the whole paper will fail." I tried explaining my logic, but the teacher didn't want to hear it. My teacher shared with me that she meant what she'd said and sent me home with a note for me to give to my mother expressing what she'd told me about my z's.

My mother sat me down and asked me, "Why do you write your z's backwards?" She said, "Many teachers have mentioned it and they were not concerned because they expected that you would have corrected it by now. This teacher thinks you are doing it on purpose."

"I am doing it on purpose," I explained. Then, I told her why. I remember her listening and then smiling and saying, "That makes sense. In life, though, the thing that makes sense to us isn't always how it's going to work out. It is okay to try, but sometimes we should pick our battles. Maybe since everyone in the world does it this way and already understands it, it is okay for you to let this battle go." Needless to say, I did, and my z's are written correctly – though, secretly, I still question why the letter goes that way.

My upbringing was not without flaws; I grew up in a single-parent home and there was a litany of obstacles between then and now that I have encountered to make it to where I am today. Just like many of you, I have my wounds from the journey, because, after all, no one makes it to adulthood without scars. Growing up, I do remember my mother usually being willing to listen to my logic and ideas, though. I remember her challenging teachers when I told her I didn't think I was being treated fairly. I also remember her encouraging me to ask questions of folks with authority, like at visits to the doctor or dentist. I

accompanied her to parent-teacher conferences, where I recall most parents attended without their kids. If I had to guess, I imagine my willingness to speak up started with my mother always encouraging me to speak up in situations like these, starting when I was under the age of 10.

As I got older, I continued to stand up for myself on all kinds of things. From pushing back on college professors' grading scales to calling the cell phone company about errors on my bill, I learned early that if you don't say anything, it can cost you. When you are younger it costs you grades and a few extra bucks on a small bill, but the costs add up as you age to include bigger and more costly losses. Not speaking up can cost you the respect of those around you, it can cost you the equity of being paid fairly, and it can even cost you access to opportunity – all because you didn't say anything. I don't know about you, but I want all the options, the choices, the vastness of chance, so I am going to ask for them! And when the answer is no, I am going to ask why. I am going to always press for equity and will not hesitate to adjust how I spend my time, presence, or dollars in lieu of contributing to injustice in any way. There have been some losses because I pushed back – some jobs, some friends, some opportunities – but nothing that was worth holding on to when I look back and truly consider how I was being treated.

I will be candid: I had to learn *how* to push back. In my younger years, I'd get frustrated and loud and snappy when I identified an injustice. My quick-witted snarky responses impacted me in some tough ways; I struggled to get promoted in companies and at one point was suspended for how I spoke to a leader. A couple of romantic relationships ended because of how I talked to my boyfriend. I had to learn how to speak up, and it took some years, but now I know just how to appropriately push back without doing

the kind of damage that can hold me back. I understand now that there is a way to say anything and have it land well, even if it stings a little.

I also understand that when I don't speak up and I let things slide, it doesn't impact just me - it impacts many other things I may not immediately see, because we are all a part of the system. The turbulence of recent years has a lot of folks talking about the systems we operate in and the bias that shows up in them. From human resources, to technology, to the government - folks are becoming better able to understand how systems and the processes within those systems can oppress different types of people.

Although in some cases you hear about calls to address the many biases and the discrimination folks are uncovering, other times folks say nothing, and whatever the systemic problems are, they just continue. The longer a problem goes on, the more folks it can impact and, for me, that usually makes me want to speak up.

Speaking up about every single thing is unreasonable - we'd never be able to move forward in life that way. So, I try to speak up in three main circumstances in my own life. They are as follows:

1. When I am not being treated fairly. I have to protect myself, so I always speak up when I am not being included or am experiencing inequity.
2. When I notice someone else isn't being treated fairly and I have the ability to speak up. When I say ability, I mean that I am able to say something and I am not risking being physically or emotionally harmed or attacked. This one is tricky because in 2021, folks like to pretend that hurt feelings are actual harm. The fact is, feelings are going to get hurt just living everyday life!

3. When I have the power or influence to change whatever is going on. I am always open to making adjustments to include folks or be more equitable with anything I control or have a say over.

It is possible that you did not have a parent who gave you the permission as a child to ask questions, challenge the status quo, or query authority figures. If you didn't build the muscle young, it is not too late. You still can start to push back, and the three areas above might be good starting points to give you an idea of where and when you should speak up. As you read, you will learn skills and tactics to help you know what and how to say things when the opportunity to speak up arises – even if you have to do it scared.

Speaking of scared, speaking up takes consistent practice and bravery. Although most of my friends consider speaking up to be a core part of my identity, I still get nervous about doing it. I get that weird feeling in my belly or my chest, too. At times, I too have to take a moment to figure out the right approach and the right words for each moment. I get better and better the more I push through and do it, though. The same is true for you; the more you speak up and advocate for yourself and others, the easier it becomes to spot when something isn't right and to actually build up the nerve to say something to address it.

## **Allies and Advocates Must Master Taking Action**

In *Allies and Advocates*, I cover speaking up as one of the actions that are critical for anyone to consider themselves an ally or an advocate. Specifically, I remind folks that speaking up is a brave thing. When you decide it is important to action on inclusion and equity, you will

discover a number of opportunities to speak up, and a number of them will feel challenging. Think about how many times you have suffered bad service in a restaurant and simply said to yourself, "I just won't be back." A good amount of the time we will not speak up for ourselves, let alone speak up for others. We aren't brave enough to get past the idea that it is going to be a challenging discussion, so we will settle for unfair treatment, often out of fear of confrontation. What we fail to consider when we make these compromises is that the person who treats us poorly will continue, often oblivious, to mistreat other people. There is nothing inclusive or equitable about that.

It doesn't matter how many programs, speakers, and toolkits you build or buy. Inclusion and equity cannot be purchased or manufactured by outside consultants. Each individual person who is a part of a culture or community must act on inclusion and equity for them to happen. Whether in the workplace or in the nation, the path to inclusion and equity requires that you change how you behave, and everyone else around you has to be willing to do the same. Learning inclusive and equitable behaviors is not something you pick up in a book or training. It is something you learn by participating in a culture where you give feedback (which requires you to speak up) and you receive feedback (which requires those around you to speak up). You can't move toward inclusive and equitable treatment without people speaking up. You won't know if you are mispronouncing someone's name if they do not speak up. No one knows if they are gendering you incorrectly if you do not speak up. I won't know that a behavior was culturally inappropriate if no one tells me. The failure to push back, speak up, and challenge ideas leads to costly reputation damage every single day. Consider these few incidents over the past few years: