

Say More About That...

And Other Ways to

Speak Up,

Push Back,

and **Advocate**

for Yourself and Others

AMBER CABRAL

WILEY

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*

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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.

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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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