

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Can't Talk About My Achievements Without Dying of Embarrassment

**How to Talk About Your Work in Meetings,
Performance Reviews, and Job Interviews
Without Bragging or Downplaying
Everything You've Done**



**We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—
and we'll even have something to laugh about.**

I Can't Talk About My Achievements Without Dying of Embarrassment

How to Talk About Your Work in Meetings,
Performance Reviews, and Job Interviews
Without Bragging or Downplaying
Everything You've Done

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

CONTENTS

INTRO	5
Chapter 1 - It Was Just My Job	11
Chapter 2 - Modesty With a Delete Button.....	18
Chapter 3 - Is This Bragging Yet?	25
Chapter 4 - Your Career Is Not a Grocery Receipt.....	32
Chapter 5 - Good Work Does Not Send Notifications	39
Chapter 6 - You Do Not Need to Sound Like Your Own Brochure	47
Chapter 7 - If It Wasn't Perfect, It Doesn't Count.....	55
Chapter 8 - Someone Else Will Always Have a Bigger Story	63
Chapter 9 - Stop Naming Strengths. Show the Evidence	71
Chapter 10 - Your Performance Review Started Months Ago	79
Chapter 11 - Do Not Wait for Someone Else to Explain Your Work.....	87
Chapter 12 - The Interviewer Does Not Need Your Legend.....	94
Chapter 13 - Not Everything Can Be Turned Into a Percentage	102
Chapter 14 - Learn to Accept Credit Without Throwing It Back.....	110
Chapter 15 - What If Nobody Is Impressed?.....	118
Chapter 16 - When Your Work Looks Too Ordinary	125

Chapter 17 - When the Question Hits Harder Than Expected.....	133
Chapter 18 - Incognito Mode Has a Habit of Turning Itself Back On	140
Chapter 19 - Do Not Turn Visibility Into a Second Job	147
Chapter 20 - Tell the Truth, Then Stop	155

INTRO

You are sitting in a performance review, and your manager asks a question that should be almost embarrassingly easy: "What are you most proud of this year?" You have answers. Plenty of them. You fixed the project that had been wobbling toward disaster for six weeks. You spotted a problem before it became expensive. You trained a new colleague who now works independently. You handled a client conversation nobody was particularly eager to volunteer for. You built something, improved something, prevented something, delivered something. Your brain opens the filing cabinet containing all of this evidence, looks directly at it, and says, "Hmm. Nothing comes to mind." So you smile awkwardly and answer, "I mean... I was just doing my job." Twelve months of work have now been compressed into a sentence suitable for someone who occasionally refills the office printer. Your manager nods. You nod. Somewhere inside you, several perfectly respectable achievements quietly put on their coats and leave.

The strange part is that you may be excellent at talking about almost anything except your own contribution. Ask you to explain the project, and you can describe the dependencies, risks, timelines, customer concerns, technical limitations, and why the spreadsheet has seventeen tabs even though nobody remembers approving tab fourteen. Ask what you personally did, and suddenly language becomes dangerous. "Well, we all worked on it." True. "I only helped with one part." Possibly. "Anyone could have done it." An interesting claim, especially considering that several people had the opportunity and somehow you were

the one doing it. The moment your own competence enters the conversation, an internal legal department appears and begins reviewing every sentence for excessive self-importance. "You said you led the project. Do we have sufficient evidence for the word led? Could we perhaps replace it with stood near the project while things happened?"

This problem is often mistaken for modesty, but modesty is only part of it. The deeper issue is that many capable people have learned to treat accurate self-description as socially suspicious. Saying "I did this well" feels dangerously close to saying "I am extraordinary, please form an orderly line for autographs." So they protect themselves by shrinking the facts. They turn "I redesigned the process and reduced repeated errors" into "I helped a bit." They turn "I took responsibility when the original owner left" into "We managed somehow." They turn a measurable result into "It worked out." The achievement remains real, but the language becomes so cautious that the listener would need forensic training to find it. Then, months later, the same person wonders why somebody else seems more visible. Usually that somebody else has not discovered secret executive magic. They simply used a subject and a verb.

There is another reason this problem survives: your own skills become ordinary to you. If you are good at organizing messy work, the mess stops looking impressive once you have organized it. If you are good at calming difficult conversations, you remember that the conversation ended calmly, not that your judgment helped it get there. If you notice risks quickly, you may assume everyone noticed them. Familiar competence has a camouflage effect. The things you do well start feeling like basic human functions,

somewhere between breathing and remembering where the meeting room is. Meanwhile, somebody watching from the outside may be thinking, "How did they untangle that in twenty minutes?" You are thinking, "I don't know, it was obvious." This is how expertise quietly disguises itself as Tuesday.

Workplaces make this even more complicated because good work is not always visible at the moment it happens. A manager may see the final result but not the six decisions that prevented trouble. A recruiter sees your résumé, not the evening when you rebuilt the analysis because the original assumptions collapsed. A senior leader may know that a project launched on time without knowing who noticed the schedule conflict early enough to fix it. Even colleagues often see only their part of the machinery. This does not mean everyone is careless or unfair. It means people are busy, information is incomplete, and your work does not come with a small narrator walking behind it saying, "For context, this bit was actually quite difficult." If you rely entirely on other people to reconstruct your contribution, you are outsourcing an important part of your career to collective memory, which is brave in the same way leaving your airport arrival time to group chat consensus is brave.

The solution is not to become louder. It is not to turn every meeting into a press conference about your recent accomplishments, update your professional profile because you successfully ran a Tuesday call, or develop the conversational habit of introducing yourself with quarterly results. That would solve one problem by creating a much more exhausting one. The useful skill is far less dramatic: learning to describe your work accurately, proportionately, and at the right moment. Sometimes that means one

sentence. Sometimes it means a clear example in a job interview. Sometimes it means being able to explain during a performance review what changed because of your contribution. And sometimes it simply means accepting "Great job" with "Thank you" instead of immediately producing a five-minute argument for why the compliment has been issued to the wrong person.

That requires a different relationship with evidence. Instead of asking, "Does this sound impressive enough?" you learn to ask better questions. What was actually happening? What did I personally contribute? What changed afterward? What part belonged to other people? What does this example demonstrate about how I work? Those questions are useful because they move attention away from personality theater. You do not need to feel like a confident person before you can answer them. You do not need to experience a warm glow of self-belief while saying, "I led the analysis." You only need the statement to be true. Confidence is helpful, but facts are wonderfully low-maintenance. They do not require affirmations before breakfast.

You will also need to get comfortable with an inconvenient truth: good self-description can still feel embarrassing at first. That feeling is not reliable proof that you have crossed into bragging. Sometimes it is simply the sensation of using muscles you normally avoid. If you have spent years answering praise with "It was nothing," then saying "Thanks, I put a lot of work into that" may feel as if you have just ordered a bronze statue of yourself for the lobby. You have not. You have completed a normal conversational exchange. The discomfort may arrive anyway. Let it. The goal is not to eliminate every awkward

sensation before you speak. If you wait for complete emotional comfort, you may reach retirement with an excellent record of achievements that nobody, including you, has ever heard described properly.

This book is about building a more useful middle ground between two bad options: disappearing from your own work and inflating it until it no longer resembles reality. You will learn how to notice achievements that have become invisible through familiarity, separate your contribution from the team's without stealing credit, choose examples that prove competence instead of merely sounding grand, and talk about results even when there is no glamorous percentage attached. You will learn how to prepare for meetings, performance reviews, and interviews without memorizing corporate monologues that make you sound like you swallowed a leadership brochure. You will also learn what to do when the result was imperfect, when somebody else did something more impressive, when praise makes you uncomfortable, or when you explain your contribution perfectly and the other person reacts with all the enthusiasm of someone approving an expense report.

Most importantly, none of this requires becoming a different kind of person. You do not need a louder voice, a bigger ego, or a mysterious new ability to enjoy talking about yourself. You need a clearer way to recognize what happened and a less self-destructive way to describe it. Your work does not become less collaborative because you name your part. Your mistakes do not disappear because you acknowledge your strengths, and your strengths do not disappear because you made mistakes. You are allowed to describe both without turning either into a personality

verdict. That is the whole point: less performance, more accuracy.

Because when someone eventually asks, "What did you achieve?" the answer should not require a spiritual crisis, a forensic search through twelve months of calendar entries, and an emergency meeting of your internal modesty committee. You did the work. You can learn to say what the work was.

And then, mercifully, you can stop talking.

Chapter 1 - It Was Just My Job

The meeting is almost over when your manager says, "Before we wrap up, I want to call out the work you did on the renewal issue. That could have become a serious mess, and you handled it really well." You know exactly what happened. The account had contradictory terms in three places, two teams had different assumptions about the deadline, and the client had already sent an email containing the phrase "deeply concerned," which in corporate language is roughly the stage before furniture starts moving. You pulled the documents together, found the contradiction, got the right people into one conversation, proposed a workable fix, and kept the customer from spending another week wondering whether anyone in your company owned a calendar. Your response? "Oh, it was just part of the job." Your manager pauses, says, "Well, still - good work," and moves on. Congratulations. You have just taken a perfectly accurate description of competent performance and reduced it to something that sounds like you changed the toner cartridge without being asked.

"It was just my job" feels responsible because, technically, it often is true. Many of your achievements happen inside the boundaries of your role. You were hired to solve problems, complete projects, serve customers, analyze information, make decisions, coordinate work, or keep some complicated part of civilization from falling into a shared inbox. You are not volunteering heroically every morning. There is a salary involved. This fact, however, does not mean every possible way of performing the job is equivalent. A responsibility describes what needed to happen. An achievement describes what you did with that