

# Finance executive takes the podium

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Whoever says accountants are dull hasn't attended one of Merge Gupta-Sunderji's seminars or keynote events.

The certified general accountant discovered during the course of a 14-year career at Shell Canada that she not only had a knack for public speaking, but also has a way of connecting with audiences who wanted her back time and time again to discuss leadership and communications issues in the workplace. It began to build into a new career.

"It was a gradual kind of thing. I would speak at a Kiwanis club function. And then people would call and ask if I would speak at other functions, and I'd say fine because I enjoyed it. Then they offered to pay me a small honorarium, which led to bigger honorariums. About the last three years at Shell, I'd actually started speaking professionally on a part-time basis," she recalls.

The native of Bombay, India draws on an interesting background, in addition to her senior corporate experience. Her father worked for the United Nations so she spent part of her childhood in Nigeria and Singapore. When Gupta-Sunderji was 16 the family moved to Calgary. Her first degree was an honours

Bachelor of Science in human physiology from the University of Calgary in 1986. Gupta-Sunderji was then accepted into both medical school and business school, but opted for the latter and received an MBA from her alma mater in 1988.

Over the next 14 years, she earned progressively senior positions as she rose through the ranks of Shell's corporate head office in Calgary. Starting in the company's management track program, by 1990 Gupta-Sunderji had moved into a leadership position, which she was able to parlay into important financial roles in the internal audit, customer service, and oil sands end of the business.

Gupta-Sunderji began studying in the CGA program in 1994. The prompt to pursue a professional accounting designation came from a mentor at Shell who'd asked what her goals within the company were. Upon learning that she ultimately wanted to be controller or treasurer, "he told me, 'Merge, you need to think about getting a formal accounting (education).'"

"At that time, being a speaker (as a career) was the furthest thing from my mind," recalls Gupta-Sunderji, who earned her CGA designation in 1997.

But as she spoke to more audiences during the late 1990s and



Gupta-Sunderji

early 2000s, Gupta-Sunderji realized the leadership and staff communications issues she was talking about resonated strongly with her audience, which had experienced much the same thing in their own corporate environment.

By 2002, she'd also made a self-discovery.

"One of the things I've always talked to people about is stepping outside your comfort zone," said Gupta-Sunderji, who likes to explain to audiences that lobsters cast off old shells to grow new ones because they instinctively know that the old shell will restrict future growth.

"But unlike a snake, which when it molts its skin, there's another waiting, when lobsters cast off their shell, it takes them about two days to grow another. And in those two days, the lobster is completely vul-

nerable. That's a message I gave to people, but then I (ultimately) started to think more and more about myself and said, 'maybe I'm not pushing myself to the limit the way I need to'."

So in 2002, following a move to Toronto that was actually related to her husband Al Sunderji's career, she decided to take the leap into full-time public speaking. And hasn't looked back. "I'm loving it," she told *The Bottom Line*.

Early in 2005, the accountant-turned speaker will address her one hundredth audience in a repertoire of engagements that has taken her across North America, including its northern and southern fringes (like Benita Springs, Florida and Inuvik, in the Northwest Territories).

Gupta-Sunderji has addressed U.S. audiences such as Honeywell Corp., for whom she conducted several leadership and communications sessions over a two-day conference in Florida this past October, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, whom she holds leadership-training seminars for in New York twice a year.

In Canada, she has addressed conferences for three provincial CGA associations as well as Mercer Human Resources Consulting, whose employees she addressed at

their annual retreat, and the Government Finance Officers Association in Canada, for whom she held a training session at Banff in May 2004, among others.

Gupta-Sunderji is an engaging speaker, but admits her humour once got the better of her. At a leadership conference in Ottawa in 2003, she was teaching a group of 300 women effective listening techniques, and gave them some homework to hone their skills.

"I told them to 'find a speech or debate on TV or radio - something that bores the heck out of you - and force yourself to listen to what the speaker is saying for five minutes.' Then without thinking, I said 'a really good place to go is CPAC (Canada's political channel).'"

"I look over and three women are literally rolling around in their chairs wiping tears out of their eyes laughing. I stopped and said 'did I say something funny?' It took them about a minute to get under control; then one of them turns to the person next to her and gasps out, 'this is the programming director for CPAC.' Of course, the whole room erupted in laughter."

In addition to public speaking, she also regularly writes columns and has appeared on CBC Radio's program *The Softer Side of Business* to discuss management-related issues.