

THE HILL

Kamala needs to ‘man up’ for her debate against Trump

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When Vice President Harris steps onto the debate stage next week in Philadelphia with former President Trump, “Kamala Aunty,” her honorific in her South Asian subculture, must step aside. She needs to become “Boss” Kamala instead.

Harris is entering a treacherous period for her presidential candidacy, with her honeymoon drawing to a close. She will not have the comfort of the teleprompter for

the debate.

How she performs will be crucial, with elections just about two months away. Trump and his supporters will look to skewer her for her new-age word salads of old to portray her as incompetent. She cannot let her guard down, especially given the high stakes in Pennsylvania and other swing states.

Put simply, Harris must be as plainspoken as “the Boss,” rockstar legend Bruce Springsteen, who has eviscerated Trump in multiple interviews, calling him a “great embarrassment.” While the “Kamala Aunty” image has helped her cement her standing among South Asians and millennials through memes and swag, like T-shirts touting “Kamala Aunty for the People” and “Vote for Kamala Aunty,” it won’t help project strength and dominance against a seasoned and relentless streetfighter like Trump.

Harris must find her inner boss. She must deploy the same new oratory swagger she unleashed during her Democratic National Convention acceptance speech and her Labor Day speech to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 5 on Pittsburgh’s South Side.

As a former journalist, I’ve been coaching tech executives — mostly male — for years now on being effective communicators. After studying hours of Harris’s speeches, including at the DNC, it’s clear that she has undergone a much-needed rhetorical and strategic retooling in recent months.

First, instead of flowery, circuitous language, like about a “coconut tree” and how young people “exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you,” she’s getting to the point like a boss with declarative sentences.

“We are not going back to when Donald Trump tried to cut Social Security and Medicare,” she said in her acceptance speech. “We are not going back to when he tried to get rid of the Affordable Care Act, when insurance companies could deny people

with

pre-existing conditions. We are not going to let him eliminate the Department of Education that funds our public schools. We are not going to let him end programs like Head Start that provide preschool and child care for our children. America, we are not going back.”

Harris is also doing a much better job of delivering her points with even intonation, which comes across as more “masculine” — something voters associate with strong leadership — than her previous upticks at the end of sentences. She only had one slip-up toward the end of her DNC speech, when she was trying to make a point about the “promise of America,” code-switching to her previous sing-song up-speak.

She made the same switch toward the end of her Labor Day speech when talking about the “opportunity economy.” Harris must work with her team to stay consistently even-toned and “muscular,” so that she is comfortable whenever she speaks.

Most importantly, both of these recent speeches show that Harris has mastered the art of narrative and storytelling.

In her DNC speech, she drew a clear through-line between her immigrant and working-class origins and the influence of her mother, who she says taught her to fight injustice. It’s a tale that resonates with many key voting blocs, including working women, minorities and immigrants; it humanizes her, reinforces her political values and underscores her commitment to justice. At her Labor Day speech in Detroit on Monday, Harris shared stories of attending civil rights marches “in a stroller” with her parents and learning lessons from those experiences about strength in numbers. She must continue those evocative narratives into the debate and her media interviews — and with consistency.

Many media pundits described her DNC oratory as “bracing” and “hawkish” as she declared that the world’s dictators are “rooting for Trump.” As she prepares to face off with the former president — a master of political theater — Harris’s ability to maintain this

muscular image will be crucial to withstanding his attempts to smear her in debate talking points and ad buys leading into Nov. 5.

Harris must not succumb to the weak trendline of the last decade, whereby there has been a push for female leaders to embrace so-called “feminist foreign policy,” which the United Nations describes as a recalibration to advance gender equality and women’s rights.

In the warmth-competence matrix that psychologists say hamstring female leaders and create a perilous gender labyrinth, professional women are viewed as either “warm” or “competent,” but rarely both, creating a psychological “likability trap.” Harris is clearly making a deliberate sacrifice of warmth and shifting to competence, in part due to a newly practiced stern demeanor that corrals her infectious smile and hearty laugh. Even the masculine fashion choices of her tonal pantsuits, including the all-Navy DNC speech outfit, project authority and decisiveness.

In her decision to do her big interview post-convention with her running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, rather than run solo, Harris played into the warmth-competence matrix, to mixed results. In essence, she tacitly conceded she might need help projecting competence on her own — something the media immediately picked up on.

As Harris prepares for her debate with Trump and continues to campaign across the country, these shifts in her style — declarative sentences, even tonality, clear storytelling and hawkish policy positions — will be her greatest assets. Whether or not her new approach will ultimately secure her a victory remains to be seen, but one thing seems clear: It’s only with this consistent shift that she will be able to maintain her hard-earned edge in the polls and become the “Boss” on Pennsylvania Avenue.