

# Posture and Voice

## Unconscious habit

How can you speak in a way that you can captivate your audience from the start? So that you feel happy because people listen to you, and believe you are an expert? Our manner of speaking is so familiar that we mostly don't register how we speak. It's already happened, before we know it. Speech is behaviour we have automated.

Unfortunately, many people have the experience that when they speak, people don't listen to them. Why is that, and how can we speak powerfully.

To start, become aware of this automated behaviour. The next step is to explore the wonderful Vocal Toolbox you have. Experimenting with your voice and speech, often feels unnatural at first. Know then: practice makes perfect! Just think, old shoes fit like a glove, new shoes can start off feeling stiff and strange. This seems logical – they have to be walked in. It's the same with new speaking behaviour. We have to get used to it, and slowly but surely it becomes familiar.

Go and find the right size, and a good material, (read, the model must suit you as a person!) and you'll have a lot of pleasure in your new shoes.

Practice, *'otherwise you will have a Ferrari (a good presentation), without knowing how to drive it (how to carry it out.)'* Carmine Gallo

## The Vocal Toolbox:

### Posture

Focus on your posture. Stand firm with both feet on the ground. Vital. Take leadership. Make strong, broad gestures. Start to make eye contact. Posture and voice influence each other. A strong and expressive voice is impossible without a vital posture. When you feel nervous about presenting, one response to this is to 'make myself small: I'm not there.' Become aware of it, then you can tackle it.

An open posture means that you are literally visible, not holding back, holding on or disappearing behind a pulpit. You face the audience (and not the screen, or up in the air) you make eye contact and show your enthusiasm for your subject (smile lightly with your eyes).

Allow your hands to move freely, so that the gestures supporting your story can arrive automatically. Because, they will, the gestures appear, steered by the language centre in your brain (if you don't hold them back).



*Practice out loud and record it on your telephone. Look back at it without the sound. What impression do you make?*

### Breathing, timing and pausing

Your breath is the motor, which powers your voice. The diaphragm is the muscle that steers your breath. Try, particularly when stressed, not to tighten your diaphragm. Don't speak for too long in one breath. Use pauses. Dare to pause. By doing this, you give yourself time to breath through your diaphragm.

These silences aid the content of your story. Watch any speech by ex-president Obama and you'll understand immediately what pauses can do.

The famous pianist Arthur Schnabel said: "I don't think I handle the notes much differently from other pianists. But the pauses between the notes - ah, there is where the artistry lies!" (Source: *The Charisma Myth* by Olivia Fox Cabana)

*Practice your presentation out loud and give yourself plenty of time to pause at contextually important moments. Record it and notice the effect.*

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## Voice

Your vocal cords are small, just 1.5 cm (women) up to 2.5 cm (men). That a lot of sound sometimes comes out (think about opera singers, screaming children...) happens because the large muscles in your body can support the small muscles of the vocal cords. That means, of course, that the large muscles – especially those in your back and rib cage, must be active! So, an open, strong posture supports the voice.

Practice to experience a strong and active posture in order to produce a powerful sound.



Imagine you are an opera singer. Mime the sound and posture: feel the space in your larynx, in your chest, strong and spacious, your legs firm, a large and sweeping arm movement. If it's possible for you to unabashedly make a lot of noise, do it as an opera singer! Let your voice sound large and low whilst placing your hand on your chest. Feel the vibration of your voice. Let the sounds out. YEAHHH! In the space. Always be sure to have the strong posture first, after that the sound will follow.

## Expression

Expression allows for liveliness in your speech. The key to captivating stories is variety. Visible expression: facial expression, gestures, eye contact, posture and movement.

Audible expression: prosody, volume changes, pauses, tempo and timbre.

### *Practice for liveliness*

Tell a story in different ways. Make a sound recording and register the differences.

1. Tell it with accentuation and pauses (experiment with longer and shorter pauses in a sentence)
2. Add prosody, melody and vary your volume at moments of accentuation. Use gestures, and facial expression, let your eyes “shine”. Be believable. Keep expanding it. Talk in such a way that you become enthusiastic about your own story.

*Practice for timbre, the sound of your voice.* Hear the differences in sound and volume. Watch Barbara McAfee's TED talk, *Bringing Your Full Voice to Life*.

- Fire: enthusiasm, through speaking with fire and verve: Let it resound in the next sentence *Tonight is a particular honour for me, because let's face it; my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. "Obama"*
- Water: speak with feeling, compassion, say the sentence out loud and from your heart *In the end, it is all about hope, the hope to find the guts, the hope to speak up, the hope to feel free.*
- Earth: impress, by speaking with authority, in a low tone. Do that with the sentence *Sadly, in the next 15 minutes, when I do my chat, four Americans will be dead from the food that they eat. "Jamey Oliver"*
- Light: inspire, by speaking in an intimate, soft voice *Why is giving an unforgettable presentation so difficult? What is the key to success?*

Will Stephens' TED talk, *How to sound smart in your Ted talk* gives insight into the use of various expressive elements. Can you make use of elements such as timing, differences in volume, tempo and pitch?

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## Articulation

Ensure that you prepare well, so you can stay focussed on the here and now and speak with care and attention. Sometimes it's a good idea to practice the desired articulation muscles

### *Practice*

Strengthen your articulation muscles, the lips and tongue, by speaking with a pen (or cork) in your mouth.

Say 10 lines of your text with a pen 1cm between your teeth. Over articulate intelligibly with the pen in your mouth. Try to watch your lips move out of the corner of your eye. Make sure your tongue does not touch the pen whilst speaking. After 10 lines, take the pen out of your mouth and continue speaking calmly and carefully. Because the tension in your tongue and lips has increased, you will articulate more easily and precisely. Practice regularly, and if possible, just before your presentation.

## Pace

Speaking fast is a trap for everyone who is nervous!

The result of speaking too fast is usually that pauses and timing disappear from your story. It has enormous consequences for the immediate comprehension of your story by the listener.

Accentuation and melody also disappear. Above all, there is no space for the listener to order information, to allow questions to form, to think over the material... all things you will want to set in motion.

How can you continue to adjust your tempo?

### *Practice 1*

First become aware of your speech tempo!

Then consciously place your pauses and time them. Place a FULL STOP at the end of each sentence. Or silently count a second before you continue with the next step in your argument.

After an important message say, "YES" to yourself. Notice that your sentence has more power by doing this.

### *Practice 2*

Let the vowels in the words last a fraction longer than usual. By doing this, you immediately delay your speech tempo. Above all you now have more possibility to use melody, intention and power in your voice.

## Presence

Keep your attention in the present, in the 'here and now.' So, not with your thoughts in what has happened, what you have perhaps skipped, or said unclearly. Because, how can your audience keep their thoughts on the content of your talk if you don't do it yourself. Also don't let your thoughts go on to what's coming next, but stay in the present. When you have your attention in the 'here and now,' it can give power and colour to your talk. A piece of paper with key words can help you monitor the storyline. Make contact with your listeners, look, register their presence, feel the atmosphere, before you begin to speak.

Watch the Patsy Rodenburg TED talk *The Second Circle* for more information about 'presence' in the here and now.

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## Dealing with nerves

Everyone wants to come across as relaxed, authentic and spontaneous. Paradoxically, it takes a lot of preparation. Besides the good preparation of content, possible preparation of slides, practicing your story out loud and the timing of different parts of the whole talk, it's advisable to give attention to dealing with nerves. Everyone has trouble with this when giving a presentation. Don't ignore it, pay attention to it in your preparation.

See some practical tips below:

- **Strength.** Make yourself large and spacious (just before starting). Use Amy Cuddy's 'power poses' Watch her TED talk *Fake it Till You Make It*. Communicate your power, stay strong. Avoid fidgeting and postures which diminish you.
- **Accept imperfection.** Perhaps you turn red, start to shake, miss a piece of the presentation you have prepared. Focus on your story and your audience. It helps to realise that your audience only perceive a small part of your unease. As with 'a swimming duck' – it glides over the water, but is pedalling underwater... inside you feel all the agitation, but from the outside you appear much calmer.
- **Visualise** your successful presentation. See yourself with confidence. See the enthusiasm of the audience in front of you. Influence your thoughts in a positive way before starting to speak.
- Women in particular, speak in a high voice when nervous. **Take a sip of water** (swallowing relaxes the larynx), **lower your shoulders**, and **consciously choose a slightly lower voice**.

## Books

- Patsy Rodenburg, *The Second Circle*
- Carmine Gallo, *Talk like TED*

## Video

- Will Stephen, *How To Sound Smart In Your Ted Talk*
- Amy Cuddy, *Fake It Until You Make It*
- Patsy Rodenburg, *The Second Circle*
- Barbara McAfee, *Bringing Your Full Voice To Life*