

The Care and Feeding of a Public Speaking Voice (Jan 11)

By Nick Morgan

As a public speaker, you thrive — or are mute — because of your voice. The research is only beginning to reveal how much depends on the way we hear each other's voices, but it is clear that voices convey surprising amounts of information about themselves and their owners. A recent study suggests that (men's) voices give us a fairly accurate assessment of their owners' upper body strength, for example.

The care and feeding of your voice is therefore incredibly important for your long term success. Following is a 5-step program for getting the most out of your voice and using it to propel your career success over the long term.

1. Find your maximum resonance point.

There is an optimal pitch for every voice. To find yours, get to a keyboard. Pick out the lowest note you can comfortably sing, and the highest. Count the white notes in between. For most people, that's about 2 octaves, or 16 white notes. Divide the total by 4. If it's 16, for example, the result is 4. Count up that number of white notes from the bottom end of your range. That's your maximum resonance point.

Why should you care? Because voices at their maximum resonance point are most pleasing and persuasive to others. And because if you pitch your voice lower than that habitually, or higher, you'll put strain on your vocal chords and damage them in time.

2. Support your voice and increase its resonance with good belly breathing.

Sitting down at computers for the greater part of the day, most of us breathe mostly through our upper chests. That tends to make our voices nasal, not resonant. Nasal voices are unpleasant to listen to and unpersuasive. To fight this problem, stand up, and breathe in through your stomach, expanding it with air. Then tense the diaphragmatic muscles and let the air trickle out slowly through your mouth as you speak.

Singers call this 'supporting' the voice. With good support, your voice will not only sound more resonant and thus more pleasing and persuasive, but it will also last longer.

You'll also find that this belly breathing calms you when you get an attack of adrenaline before a speech. Take 3 or 4 deep belly breaths before you walk on stage, and both you and your voice will benefit. Remember to breathe again during the course of the speech, and you'll benefit even more.

3. Retain a touch of the nasal so that your voice can be heard.

Nasal voices are intensely irritating, but resonant voices with just a touch of the nasal are both delightful and able to be heard. A voice with no nasal quality at all is difficult to detect from background noise, and it lacks conviction. We call this nasal touch 'presence' and all voices need presence.

4. Let your real voice out.

The next thing you need to do, now that you've taken care of the technical aspects of voice production, is to let your voice be heard in the larger sense. Allow your voice to rise with passion, and fall with authority, like Martin Luther King, Jr's voice patterns in his "I have a dream" speech. Don't swallow your voice, or hold back on your emotions. Your voice — your breath — was once believed to be intimately connected with your soul. Let it out, be heard. Else why get up to speak?

Technically, to deliver a great sound, keep your head up and speak to the back row, opening your mouth and bringing the sound forward. Never swallow your voice, as too many Americans, especially men, do. That damages the vocal chords and gives the voice a gravelly quality that is unpleasant and grating. More than that, it is the physical manifestation of emotion being held in check — which audiences will interpret

as insincere, inauthentic, or simply boring.

5. Have a conversation with your audience, but an elevated one.

The genre of public speaking today is a casual one. We respond better to people who talk to us informally rather than reading a speech or declaiming as in the style of 50 or 60 years ago. But that's no excuse for a lack of clarity, for a plethora of 'ums' and 'ahs' or for mumbling. Speak clearly, vary the pace, finish one sentence before jumping to the next, and generally speak *clean*.

Listening to a speech or presentation is hard work for an audience; it's hard to remember what we've heard. Make it easy on your audience by speaking clearly, forcefully, and memorably.

About the Author:

Dr. Nick Morgan is one of America's top communication theorists and presentation skill coaches. His passion is to connect the latest brain research with timeless insights into persuasive speaking and writing in order to further our understanding of how people connect with one another. For more information about Nick and his company, Public Words, visit www.publicwords.com

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