

Mastering Your Own Voice for Business Success



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by Liz Funk

By now, you have mastered the requisite firm handshake, professional appearance and business cards. But what about your voice?

“There is a sound to success, professionalism, and leadership,” says Dr. Lois Frankel, president of Corporate Coaching International. “There are things that people who sound successful and sound professional and sound like leaders do very differently from others.”

Kim Dower, a Los Angeles-based media trainer who has counted the CEOs of Starbucks and General Electric among her clientele, attributes declining verbal communication skills to an upswing in online, writing-based communication.

Consider these five strategies to becoming a more persuasive and authoritative communicator.

1. Using fewer words imparts confidence.

“The number one mistake is using too many words when fewer would do. In communication, short sounds confident,” says Dr. Frankel.

2. Watch out for “uptalk.”

Uptalk, or “upward intonation” is the relatively common habit of ending sentences at a higher pitch, which makes statements sound like questions. Dower explains that uptalking makes us feel more friendly. “But it comes across in a business situation as though you don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s consensus-seeking. It’s the new un-contentious style.” In other words, uptalking prevents you from sounding authoritative. Nix it.

3. Take a three-second pause before responding to a question or to something someone has said to you.

“That short pause gives you the opportunity to think. You can ask yourself, ‘What is the first thing I want to say, and what are the points I want to make?’ The pause shows that you are thoughtful and considerate. That you’re really considering what you’re about to say,” says Dr. Frankel. “When someone gives us an immediate response, we often don’t have the sense that they fully heard us. Because how could you answer so quickly? Pause, and consider the full message.”

4. When giving a presentation, lean into your anxiety to sound more passionate.

“There is a difference between feeling nervous and feeling self-conscious,” says Dower. “Feeling nervous has its advantages. Nervousness can release adrenaline, which can make you even more passionate. You can use the adrenaline that comes with nervousness to heighten your presentation. Use it to fuel the talk. Think of it as good energy.”

5. Don't be afraid of silence.

After you have finished your sentence—or presentation—don't fear silence in the room. Resist the urge to add one more thing. “When we don't hear someone say something back right away, we assume there is something negative about the silence. Don't ascribe negativity to the silence,” says Dr. Frankel. “Recognize that some people are thinking and processing in that silence. You need to give them that space. Especially if you've presented a new idea. Or if you want a response back from them: they're planning their response in that silent moment.”

Finally, one crucial skill when communicating—whether in a meeting or one-on-one—is to know your audience, says Dower. “Who are you speaking to? Are you speaking to people in a mentoring session where you want to relate to them? Or are you in a meeting with executives who are looking at the bottom line? We're lucky—we can change our voices based on who we're talking to: babies or dogs or people who give us our paycheck.”

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