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*Communicating Effectively*


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# Watch What You Say And How You Say It

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## *Improper voice tone and expressions can ruin an interview*

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BY WILLIAM RUSH

Joan Weatherall, a vice president for John Nuveen & Co. in Chicago, labored long and hard at the office. She often provided new ideas for improving efficiency and performance.

When the time came to present her ideas, however, Ms. Weatherall (not her real name) faltered. Although she prepared in advance, she came across poorly. She slouched in her seat and spoke in a monotone. Not surprisingly, reception to her ideas was abysmal. She ultimately resorted to memos, and her proposals took months to be acted on.

In time, Ms. Weatherall learned that for her ideas to be taken seriously, her voice had to match her intent. She learned to use the "language of the voice" as fluently as her spoken words when making presentations to others.

Other executives have similar problems on the interview circuit. When asked about their backgrounds, some become so aggressive that they answer abrasively. Although they dress appropriately and anticipate questions, they fail to understand that their vocal intonations cause interviewers to brand them as potentially abrasive employees.

In business, unfortunately, a good idea doesn't always sell itself, and being bright isn't the only criterion for job-hunting success. Often, what your voice says can be more important than your words.

To gain acceptance of your goals, you have to understand how people hear you, then learn how to craft your statements to meet their expectations. Just as a good writer uses punctuation, a good speaker should use vocal inflections to underscore simply and unobtrusively what he or she wants to say.

The process of communicating anything, whether it's a short phrase or a speech, has three critical elements—visual, vocal and verbal—easily remembered as the "three Vs of communication." Contrary to popular belief, the visual element of communication is most important, followed by the vocal. The words and knowledge of the speaker has the least initial impact.

### Visual Elements

People process information first through what they see. In interviews, for example, dressing appropriately will clear the first hurdle. Mannerisms, such as jangling change in your pocket, or using a word

or phrase repetitively may help quell your nervousness but they'll annoy listeners.

Many people aren't aware of their mannerisms. Videotaping and watching yourself in the mirror can provide clues about your appearance and help you control the visual aspects of your communication, but be wary. Don't suppress idiosyncratic gestures that make up your personal stamp; just eliminate those that weaken your delivery.

When using video, remember that you need to interpret what you see. You don't look the same on screen as you do in person. On camera, even subtle gestures and small movements seem exaggerated. In person, they aren't as noticeable. For instance, a momentary, irritated facial expression looks more

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profound on video than in person. Therefore, don't translate your tape too literally. You'll end up misjudging your appearance and placing unnecessary restrictions on your movements.

### The Vocal Message

People understand the importance of their words and appearance and are accustomed to preparing them, yet they often ignore the vocal message. What the voice imparts is often more descriptive than the words themselves, especially when there's a distracting incongruence between the vocal and verbal messages.

When a communication has gone awry, you'll often hear "It isn't what he said that made me mad, it's how he said it," or "She shouldn't have used that tone of voice." These comments illustrate that most people recognize the strength of the vocal message. The vocal subtext can reinforce or weaken business presentations as well.

For example, the 51-year-old CEO of a New York City-based national construction company often used the lower part of his vocal range when speaking. To be heard across a small room, he had

to use breath pressure associated with speaking loudly. This made him sound angry or contentious when he was just giving information.

The vocal message helps interviewers judge the degree of enthusiasm, belief, conviction, affection, disdain or reluctance in what you're saying. If you use your voice ineffectively, you may not come across as you intended. For a vocal message to support your intentions, try to employ the proper mechanics.

The two elements of vocal mechanics are breathing and pitch. If you can determine your most effective breathing style and speak at a pitch that leaves room for a vocal subtext, you'll make a great start at being heard.

The dynamics of breathing allow a range of sounds that vary greatly in color and volume. Ironically, the mode of breathing you use when angry comes close to the ideal. When angered, you often surprise yourself, as well as the person you address, with the quantity and quality of sound you produce. Much of the surprise stems from the small amount of work required to achieve this sound. The speaker normally feels a slight expansion at the sides of the waist just above the hip bones, rather than a relaxed belly breath.

People commonly misunderstand the use of pitch. In simple terms, unimportant or "framing" words should be delivered on the "best note," or a pitch that gives the most sound for the least effort. Further, the last syllable of a declarative sentence should come down in pitch. A rise in pitch betrays your uncertainty; a downward glide on the last syllable indicates you believe in what you said.

Another common mistake if you're unsure of yourself is to drop your voice. I call it the "Ted Baxter Syndrome" when men try to sound authoritative by artificially deepening their voices. Since most men have middling voices—neither very high nor low—the result ranges from authoritarian to comic; the tragedy is that it sounds wonderful only to the speaker.

Nervousness also affects the vocal message. Nervous feelings are a physical signal that something unusual is happening. Trying to make them disappear is like smashing the fire alarm instead of tending to the fire.

It may help if you view a presentation or interview as an exercise in adaptive behavior where you

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# Communicating

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have to counter powerful reflexive tendencies. This is akin to learning to skate, ski or insert a contact lens—all of which seem unnatural at first.

Although your nervous reflexes will tell your body to become rigid, try to counter that tendency. Keep your upper body as flexible as possible. As breathing moves to the upper part of the chest, sense the tension, release it and consciously practice breathing at the sides of your waist.

Another reflex action is to speak more quickly. This impedes vocal communication because the listener becomes lost or disinterested when you speak too fast. By moderating your speech, you can

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think ahead, avoid stumbling over words and allow the interviewer to process what you say. You'll also appear poised and in control.

## **The Verbal Message**

Your expertise determines the verbal message, or the meaning of the words themselves. When preparing for a meeting or interview, tailor your responses into well-phrased, terse replies. If you don't prepare, you risk making rambling, unfocused responses. Try to rehearse out loud. Your words work differently on your tongue than they do in your head.

Once Hollywood introduced the talkies, many silent screen performers found themselves out of work because their voices failed to match their physical presence. People who don't address the three Vs of communication run a similar risk. ●