

SPEAKING — IT'S NOT JUST
WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S ALSO
HOW YOU SAY IT!

*"We often refuse to
accept an idea merely
because the tone of
voice in which it has
been expressed is
unsympathetic to us."*

Friedrich Nietzsche

Vocal clarity

Even if you have clarified your message to yourself and have used empathy to develop your approach, the way you say the words can muddy your message. Both the way you pronounce the words and the tone of voice you use will have an effect. So just as using the right words is essential, it's important to make an effort to use an effective tone. Your voice, your face and your body all have a role to play in how you are understood.

You say potato, I say potahto

Pronunciation will be more of an issue in a multicultural environment than in a homogeneous one. Those of you who work for multinational companies will be familiar with how often one can end up wondering, "Did he say 'thought' or 'taught'? Was that word 'pilot' or 'pirate'? Did she really say 'sheet', or was it something else?!"

Shirley has a very relevant personal experience to share about this:

When I first came to Singapore from Sheffield in 1983, my employer and colleagues had quite a challenge understanding my Yorkshire accent. My students had an even greater challenge. I remember one day saying to a class, "Oooh I'm eatin' some very different food since I've been in Singapore. Last night, me friends took me out and it's the first time I've ever eaten duck." Now in Yorkshire, we pronounce the word 'duck' the same as the word 'book'. I would also use this deep 'oo' sound in words like 'love', 'up', 'under', 'cup'. So having told my students that I had eaten duck, one girl looked at me and said, "You ate a dog?" Obviously the way I said the word 'duck' sounded to her like 'dog'. After having a laugh with the students, they all started trying my Yorkshire accent, which had everyone in stitches. I knew then that to avoid misunderstandings, I was the one

who had to take responsibility for increasing the clarity of my speech. I couldn't expect an entire nation to change, after all. So I quickly realised that I had to speak more slowly, pronounce my words more clearly, especially the beginnings and the endings, and take particular care with words containing 'u'. It took me a while, but I learned that when I smile broadly I can say 'up', 'under', 'cup', 'love', 'but', 'butter', 'duck', etc in exactly the same way that Singaporeans do. The only problem is that after a while my face starts to ache!!



Fast Fact

You can read another funny story about Shirley's first overseas posting in Singapore on page 156.

Four steps to increasing vocal clarity

Fortunately, Shirley was able to make the required adjustments to her accent. But what if you find it extremely difficult to do this, because your accent is so strong? This simple four-step process will help you right away.

Step 1:	Slow down. We can often understand words individually that we would have trouble picking out of a rapid sentence.
Step 2:	Keep your language simple. Let people slowly get used to the way you speak.
Step 3:	Check for understanding. Ask your listeners if they have understood your pronunciation, since they may hesitate to tell you themselves.
Step 4:	Make use of written messages. Do this either as an introduction to a spoken conversation, or as a follow-up afterwards, to make sure your meaning is clear.

People from the same culture can also have trouble understanding each other, especially when a speaker is prone to mumble or to speak as if they need to dash off to catch a train. If you are aware that you are guilty of either of these tendencies, there's a very clear-cut solution:

e-nun-ci-ate

Take the time to enunciate (or articulate) clearly, and you won't have to take more time to repeat yourself. It may feel a bit (or very) unnatural to you at first, as it's not your normal way of speaking, but stick with it. Your comfort level will rise, and more importantly, your clarity will improve, which means your listener's comfort level will increase. As a result, your conversations will be more productive and your reputation will be enhanced.



Aha! Moment

The more I learn to enunciate words carefully, the more effective my message will be.

Touch up your tone

Remember when you were a child and your parents used to say to you, "Don't you use that tone of voice with me, young lady," or "I don't think I appreciate that tone, young man"? Your tone may have very authentically represented how you were feeling, but it clearly wasn't appropriate to the situation (at least in your parents' opinion!) and it wasn't helping to resolve things.

Well, tone is equally important now that we're all grown up. Even more than the words being said, our tone provides listeners with clues to so many things, including whether or not the speaker believes in what he/she is saying, whether or not the speaker is enthusiastic, and whether or not we need to feel threatened in the situation.

Since it's part of our survival skills to pick up these signals, most people can hear the variations in a speaker's tone when they are listening. We generally tune out both monotonous and overly noisy speakers; we generally enjoy conversing with people who vary their tone depending on what they are saying and to whom; we generally avoid as much as possible people who express a lot of irritation when they speak to us.



Myth Buster

Well-chosen words speak for themselves.

Only if people are still listening! Choose tones that listeners will want to listen to.

Given how sensitive we are to the sound of others, it's strange how many of us are deaf to the effect our own tone has. Some people may find a monotonous voice as stupefying as everyone else does, but when it comes to their turn to speak, they may be just as monotonous. We don't want to listen to it, but we don't hear it in ourselves. (Or we do hear it, but don't want to make the effort to change it.) Similarly, we may have the normal reaction of recoiling or digging in our heels when someone speaks to us sharply. But when we are irritated and want things to change, we may speak just as sharply, and bizarrely end up surprised when nothing changes.



Try This

Work on the range of tones at your disposal by practicing saying the same thing in different ways. For example, say “I’m very happy to see you” first with a neutral, monotonous tone. Do you sound convincing? Now say it in an overly enthusiastic way. How does that sound? What if you say it as if you’re thinking about something really irritating that happened earlier in the day? Will any of these tones work when you really want to convince someone of your sincerity? Start being aware of the tones you use at work, and consider whether they are the ones that best suit your purpose.

Emotional excess

Emotions very often keep people from communicating. They may be too scared, or too territorial, or too proud. You have probably also noticed that emotions force people to communicate too quickly, or too aggressively, or inconclusively, or incoherently. Why is this? Well, when we get emotional, we experience a surge of the chemical adrenalin in our bodies. This happens whether we are angry, delighted, or ashamed. High levels of adrenalin limit our ability to think rationally. We need to calm ourselves to lower the adrenalin before we can think. Once we can think, we can trust ourselves to talk.

If you feel very emotional about something, it may be better to wait for a while before trying to put the message across. Communication can often fail if we are highly charged about an issue, and equally if the person speaking to us is highly charged. Just as you can ask for a moment to calm down and get your thoughts together before continuing an emotional discussion, you can ask someone who is getting emotional to take a

moment and do the same. This can be done respectfully, so as not to inflame things further, by telling them that you want the discussion to be as productive as possible, and so that no one says something they will later regret.



Danger Zone

Don't imagine that it's part of being authentic to show when you are angry.

Showing when we're angry may be authentic, but this doesn't mean that we should trust ourselves to speak at these times, especially in professional situations.

As the writer Ambrose Bierce put it, "Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret." Take time to calm down, and make sure you understand the situation. Choose your words. Choose your tone. Then open your mouth.

It really pays to consider your tone of voice when you do business. It is imperative for face-to-face communication. Tone is even more important over the phone, because a lot of energy is lost over the phone lines and you don't have the benefit of eye contact or body language. This means you need even more energy on the phone than you do face to face.

Vocal hazards

Your voice can be your greatest tool in your communication toolbox, but the way you use it can prevent you from being understood in the best possible way. Here are some hazards to watch out for.

1. Being too loud

If your volume is turned up too high, you may sound aggressive rather than assertive. This will come across as overpowering and perhaps intimidating.

2. Being too soft

On the other side of the coin are people who speak very softly. Just as we don't want to listen to a person who shouts, we also don't listen to people who speak too softly. Speaking softly comes across as lacking confidence, and it will not help you deliver your message effectively.

3. Mumbling

Mumbling may be part of being soft spoken, or it could also be a confidence issue. If people keep asking you to repeat yourself because of your mumbling, this will become very frustrating, and it will detract from presenting a clear, confident message.

4. Sounding uncertain

Nerves may be to blame if your voice sounds shaky or hesitant, or it could be that you're not sure of your message. If you sound uncertain, how can you expect other people to have confidence in what you are saying?

5. Questioning tone

Uncertain people sometimes raise their voice at the end of each sentence, as if asking questions all the time. Imagine these statements sounding like questions: "My name is John Lim?", "We're going to have a great day today?" It's impossible to come across as mature or authoritative when you speak this way.

6. Condescending tone

One to be avoided at all costs is the “I’m better than you” tone in your voice. A patronising, condescending tone will very quickly get the other person’s back up and do nothing for developing relationships.

7. Bluntness

Negative situations happen in life. It’s unfortunate, but it’s true. When associated emotions are reflected in your message, however, it can sound much worse than you intended. For example, frustration can sound like an angry accusation. Directness can be received as rudeness and people may take offence. Offended people stop listening.

The key to getting your vocal expression right is to learn to manage your emotions and be sincere. People will find what you say worth listening to and they will see you in a positive light.



Try This

Find a friend to help you with this. Prepare a short message of two or three sentences. Deliver it first of all in a very blunt, direct way, holding nothing back. Then repeat the message in a concerned, assertive tone.

How did the other person respond? What has it taught you about your vocal expression?

Facial clarity

Did you notice that when you tried the last exercise, you changed your facial expression dramatically in order to produce the required effect? It’s practically impossible for a human to produce a happy sound without

putting on a happy face, or to sound angry without looking angry. When we try to sound neutral, our faces also go blank. As a result, our facial expressions play a big role in delivering our meaning, and can also kill our meaning completely. A moment's thought can make all the difference, as Alison explains:

I was consulting in a company that was experiencing a lot of misunderstandings, the most serious of which were between the CEO, a man, and the VP of marketing, a woman. The VP felt ill at ease because the CEO seemed very cold and critical to her. I had trouble understanding this at first, because he seemed quite open and understanding to me. And indeed he was. But he regularly looked at her, or anyone who walked in his office, with what I now refer to as Work Face. This is the face we put on when we are working hard, thinking, concentrating, digging for solutions. When someone knocks at our door and we look up at them, we still have Work Face on. All it really means is that we are still concentrating, but to the person who just knocked, it looks for all the world like, "What the heck do you want?" and has a very inhibiting effect.

When I first saw the CEO's Work Face, I recognised what the VP had been worrying about. So I explained to her that she needn't take his look personally at all. I also suggested to him that he take a moment to relax and adopt an open facial expression when a colleague knocked at his door, so he made sure they felt comfortable talking to him. If they stopped talking, he'd have a lot more trouble running the company!

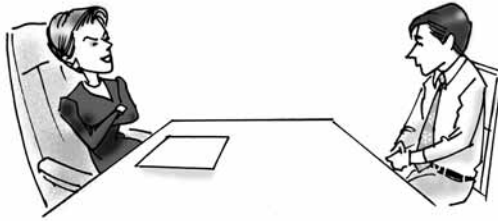


Do you tend to look at people wearing your Work Face? Try relaxing your face when someone approaches you; you'll see what can happen if you make an effort to be more welcoming.

What is your body saying?

Okay, so now you've worked on structuring your message, you've considered it from your listener's point of view, you're enunciating clearly, you've chosen an appropriate tone and you've sorted out your face. Are you done? Nope! Sorry! Speaking is an activity that is most effective when not only your face but also your body supports your message.

Take a look at the following three illustrations. The speaker is using the same words, but is using her face and her body in three different ways. Which one do you think would put the applicant most at ease?



"You're clearly very well-qualified for this job. I'm glad you applied."

No doubt you answered that the third illustration shows a woman whose body language and facial expression both support her words. Naturally, if her goal is in fact to make this applicant feel uncomfortable, one of the other attitudes would suit her goals better. But if your objective is to gain people's trust and be convincing, make sure that your body language isn't the enemy of your words.

Body language bloopers

You want your posture, gestures and facial expressions to support your message, and help you appear confident and relaxed. There are certain behaviours that will not work in your favour, however. Here are some to be aware of.

1. Slouching

Some big comfortable chairs are very easy to slouch in; you just want to lean back and relax. When you do this, though, the danger is looking too relaxed and informal. People might not take you seriously, and, just as importantly, might not think you take them seriously either. Just as your mother taught you at the dining table, it's best to sit up — and stand up — straight if you want to come across as an assertive, confident communicator.

2. Distracting habits

Do you twist your hair, or play with your rings? Do you click your pen continuously, or twirl it around? Such distractions will ensure the listener is paying attention to your habits, and forming judgements about them, instead of concentrating on your message.

3. Invading space

Have you ever been in conversation with someone who keeps getting closer and closer, too close for comfort, and often quite loud too? You end up leaning away from them and feeling very uncomfortable. There is no hard and fast rule as far as safe space is concerned, but no one feels comfortable when the other person is insensitive to personal space.

4. Hovering

It's uncomfortable to talk to someone who is standing over you while you sit. For maximum comfort, try to be on the same physical level, especially if the conversation is more than a couple of minutes long. If both people are seated, there will be little disparity between levels, no matter how tall or short each person is.

5. Blank looks

The only time you want a blank look is when you are playing poker. When you are trying to convey an important message, it won't help you at all. Blank looks make you appear indifferent, and others will soon feel that way too. Put some expression in your face when you pass on as well as when you receive a message.

6. Harsh looks

It's never nice to talk to people who are frowning or scowling with their eyebrows all furrowed. They look rather unappealing and unapproachable. Such expressions also have a tendency to make the speaker's tone of voice rather sharp. Be aware of what your face is doing when you communicate.

7. Threatening gestures

Finger pointing and fist pounding are very strong messages and come across as aggressive and intimidating. This is not the sort of thing to do if you want to be known as a relaxed, positive, confident communicator.



Aha! Moment

My face and body are important tools in my communication toolbox. I must use them to help me come across as a confident, relaxed communicator.

Do I look communicative in this?

Just as with your tone of voice and facial expressions, the first step to developing helpful body language is to develop an awareness of how you use your body when you are communicating. As you go through your day, ask yourself questions like these:

- Am I slouching? Does this project a lack of confidence?
- Do I fiddle with my rings during conversations? Might people think my mind is not focussed on what we're saying?
- Do I turn my body at an angle when people approach me, or do I open my body to them? Which way is more welcoming?
- Do I keep my head tilted back and look down my nose when I'm speaking? What might this mean to the listener?
- How often do I point an index finger at the other person's chest? Could this feel aggressive?

We're not saying that it is wrong to do any of these things. There can easily be times when you actually will want to use such behaviour in your communication. What we are saying, however, is that it is best for you to choose your body language rather than let your body choose for you. You may in fact be very distracted or irritated in a conversation, and want to fiddle with your rings, but before you go ahead and do so, ask yourself if this will serve the bigger purpose of getting the communication right and keeping emotions from calling the shots.

Once you are aware of how your body has been behaving while you weren't paying attention, you can start making minor adjustments that will lead to a big improvement in communication for you. Work on standing up a bit straighter, on tipping your head toward people you are talking to, on calming your hands. Think about the body language other people

are using around you, and consider which positions and actions you appreciate when they are used with you. Then you can do the same with others.



Fast Fact

We learn to speak by imitation. We can improve the way we speak by continuing to imitate, until we've found something that works best for us.

As you can see, we have a wonderful variety of tools at our disposal both for giving and for receiving messages. Ensuring that you use as many of these tools as possible, improving as you go along, will pave the road to greater understanding and better relationships at work, both of which are essential for success.



Star Tips for using the right tone and body language

1. Enunciate as clearly as possible. Pronunciation differs greatly, not only between countries but also within them, so clear articulation helps.
2. Don't weaken your message by using the right words but the wrong tone. Your tone often determines whether your listeners are open to you, or closed.
3. Make sure your face matches your words. People will look into your eyes to see how genuine you are.
4. Be sincere when speaking, and people will find you worth listening to.
5. Be aware of what your body is saying when you speak. Your posture is very often determined by your emotional state.
6. Beware of body language bloopers, which will work against you in passing on your message.
7. Wait a while before speaking if you are highly emotional about an issue.
8. Evaluate your vocal clarity occasionally, and make appropriate adjustments.
9. Remember the key steps to increasing effectiveness: slow down, use simple language and check for understanding.
10. Follow up important conversations by sending an e-mail that restates the conclusions drawn.