

Set the Tone

There's a reason why it's called "set the tone." Our voice and tone play a much bigger role than we think in determining the extent to which we come across as forceful personalities. An increasing amount of leaders have learned that they can get real results by consciously working with their voice as a natural part of their professional tool kit.

Some people are equipped with an appealing and charismatic voice that signals credibility and authority. Yet others have voices that practically work against them, if they are shrill, croaking, aggressive, tend to mumble or sound like an apologetic whisper. Our voices follow us everywhere and can therefore block the way for us in the professional settings where we use it, as, for example, when making a presentation for the management team, the annual appraisal meeting or when having a telephone conversation with a client. The good news is that our voice is a flexible organ that can be trained and which can serve us. We are not born with a specific voice. The British Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher, had, at the start of her political career, a high-pitched and shrill voice that blurred her political messages, so very early in her career she employed a voice coach who helped her acquire a vocal pitch that was deeper and more convincing. Earlier, voice training was a discipline reserved for politicians like Mrs. Thatcher, as well as singers, actors and radio commentators. Today it has become a natural part of leadership development.

Use Your Voice, with Weighted Piano Keys

Merete Nørgaard is an actress and professional voice coach. She runs Living Voice Leadership and provides voice training for leaders and other professionals. She explains that every human voice has 88 keys, just like a piano. But actually most of us only use 3-4 of those keys when speaking. That can make us sound rather monotonous:

"Consider the tone of voice in an actress like Ghita Nørby and Sidsel Babettes Knudsen. They have the ability to create a sense of presence and that has a great deal to do with the fact that they can put to full use the many keys of the voice when they are speaking. Your voice will gain more authenticity and authority if you change where you put the emphasis on words. This also helps your colleagues or employees to get a better sense of you. For example, for many people it would be a great help if they spoke less "from the throat" but rather further down "from the chest and stomach," says Merete Nørgaard who explains that the stomach is important because the muscles in the pit of the stomach have the same function as loudspeakers that give the tones their punch.

When you speak with your whole body instead of, for example, just your throat, it will strengthen your personal power of penetration simply because it creates concord between the spectrum of words and feelings you wish to express and the actual sound that comes out of your mouth. When all the tones of the body become integrated, varied and mastered, you are better able to own "the right to be in the spotlight," which, in turn, creates authenticity and a natural sense of authority. At the same time, you acquire a readiness similar to the kind of readiness you have when catching a ball. And that is something an audience can feel. You simply become more appealing to listen to.

The Chicken Voice

During a leadership conference which included voice training, a tall, handsome man of about two meters who had a high ranking position went onstage to present himself. Much to everyone's surprise, his voice was weak and "chicken-like" which did not correspond at all to his body or his many accomplishments. Later, he went through an individual voice training program in which he worked with the fact that he often felt misunderstood by his colleagues and had gradually developed an increasingly weak tone of voice. Through the training his voice gained warmth and

volume and he experienced that he no longer was perceived as being surly and bossy by his employees.

People who have a strong ability to convey their message as a rule are very much focused on, depending on the situation, using the full register of their voice and varying the tone, sound, strength and speed with which they communicate their words according to the particular situation.

"If you have a tendency to speak in a monotonous voice, you can practice varying your tone of voice when speaking in front of an audience. In the beginning it may feel silly and exaggerated, but you will become more vibrant to listen to in the long run. Another good trick is to speak more slowly than you normally would in front of a large gathering of people. Most people tend to speak too fast due to nervousness, for example. Another great trick is to insert p-a-u-s-e-s, because making them in the right places can draw people's attention more," says Merete Nørgaard who also emphasizes that voice training in reality also has a lot to do with what you do before making a presentation. "Warm up your voice in the car before you go on stage. Loosen up your jaws, just like opera singers and actors do before a performance."

Yes, the voice is, together with the body, the greatest telltale sign and it follows you everywhere. For that reason you might as well make it your asset. That way you will get a good tone of voice. That way, the things you say will be heard by others.

Fact Box 1: The Four Qualities of the Voice

Both men and women have four categories of voices that can be trained. Two masculine (a high and a deep) and two feminine (a high and a deep). The four qualities of the voices open four different places of the body which helps the voice to be better integrated in the body, as well as being free and more nuanced:

1. **A deep masculine tone from the stomach on the vowel "o."** Get the tone out by shouting "Boooris" and "Helloooo!". Use your feet, legs and behind to get the sound out. Put in as much effort as had you been running on a treadmill.
1. **A high masculine tone in the chest on the vowel "a."** Turn on the loudspeakers in your chest, make your eyes wide and bare your teeth. Speak far out into the horizon with a "Hiiii!"
2. **A deep feminine from the throat with the vocal "u."** "UUhh!" is the passionate sound coming from the lips.
3. **A high feminine tone from the forehead on the vocal "a."** Imagine that you are a cheerful 8 year old with a smooth forehead and wide eyes, saying "aahhh!"

The four qualities of the voice are important to be able to juggle according to the situation. An example might be when you have to let an employee go which demands a softer voice reflecting genuine empathy, or a distinct but loving voice with an edge. It is oftentimes beneficial for women to get access to the dark qualities of their voice in the stomach, as, for example, when making salary negotiations.

Fact Box 2: Classic Mistakes When You Are "Onstage":

- You only use 2-3 tones. This makes you boring to listen to and signals a poor self-awareness. *Vary your tones when you speak. Feel free to exaggerate.*
- You tend to speak in "blocks." *Remember to pause often. This will draw your audience's attention.*
- You speak too fast. *Speak more slowly than you normally would.*

- You don't move your upper lip when speaking. Many of our emotions are located in the upper lip, so many people pull it down as a defense mechanism. *"Say "Uuuhh" alone in a room before going onstage.*
- Your voice signals "get lost" (imagine the shrill voice of a politician during an election campaign) and repels your audience. *Focus on making your voice more accommodating.*
- Your tone is too high. *Shift your voice down into your midriff by tensing your stomach muscles and speaking with a deeper tone (think of Obama).*
- You speak too low. *Speak louder than normal. Find the courage within you to fill the room with the vibration of your voice.*
- You fail to physically respond to the space and the audience from the start. *Accommodate your body language according to the situation, so the audience feels that you are aware of them.*

Fact Box 3: See the Transformation of Margaret Thatcher.

See the YouTube film from 2014: "THE THATCHER YEARS - Voice Analysis of Margaret Thatcher for US TV" : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRQwLrpX61M>