



Business Communication

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**Have you ever wondered why two people** can say exactly the same thing in a meeting, but only one of them gets credit for it? Many times it's the way we *sound* that makes the difference between whether or not we are actually *heard*.

We all know when someone sounds nervous or confident. Think about the following phrase hesitantly uttered, "I have something to say?" versus the same message confidently declared, "I have something to say." [Click here](#) to hear the difference — both instances are my own voice, yet the differences are striking. Which voice do you want your employees to use when speaking to clients?

We've heard a lot of discussion recently about [uptalk](#) (when our statements sound like questions) and [vocal fry](#) (when our voice is low and scratchy, especially at the ends of sentences). These challenges are constantly attributed to female speakers, but I hear them in both men and women — and the solution to both of them is deeper breathing.

As a former opera singer, I know how much breathing affects how a voice sounds. Singers must use deep breathing in order to project a strong voice across a crowded auditorium to reach every single person in the audience. I never thought that this skill would help me once I left the field of opera — until I had to give my first speech. Then, I realized how much my operatic training made me a powerful public speaker.

Now, having taught public speaking and presentation skills for over a decade, I can say with confidence that the ability to harness your breath is one of the *most important* and *least taught* areas within public speaking. It's critical when you're speaking up in a meeting and it's crucial when you're giving a speech or presentation. It's one of the key elements of executive presence.

This is not a new issue; Margaret Thatcher took voice lessons when she became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and there is a [“before and after” video](#) where you can hear the difference. Some people thought she was consciously trying to speak with a lower voice (and there is some [fascinating research](#) suggesting that people with deeper voices have more success in business and politics). However, I hear a difference in Thatcher's *breathing* which makes her voice richer, more resonant, and — as a result — lower.

When I showed that video to my class at the Harvard Kennedy School, students were split over which they preferred. Some preferred the former voice because it was soft and feminine, while others preferred the latter voice because, well, that's how they wanted a prime minister to sound.

Regardless of your gender or voice, how do you harness the power of breathing in order to speak with confidence and power?

1. **Start with the right posture.** Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, weight equally distributed, and raise your arms up over your head. Breathe in deeply. Now as you exhale, slowly lower your arms down to your sides and keep your ribcage where it is. Make sure your shoulders are back, not hunched up behind your ears. This is the best posture for speaking (and singing); you are standing tall, you are owning your full height, and you are resonating

confidence. Incidentally, this posture is similar to the power poses HBS professor Amy Cuddy talked about in her [TED](#) talk.

2. **Breathe deeply.** Put one hand on your belly button and one hand on your chest. Breathe in deeply, noticing which hand moves. I see a lot of people breathe while heaving their chest up and down, but I want you to keep your chest steady and think about breathing into your stomach as you take in breath. Then exhale slowly, like letting air out of a balloon. Having difficulty? Try “wall sits” – when you lean against a wall with your back flat against the wall and your legs slightly bent. This position helps you focus on your abdomen while breathing, instead of moving your chest. Disclaimer: if you feel light-headed or dizzy, stop this exercise and breathe normally. It shouldn’t hurt — it should simply feel different.
3. **Speak “on the breath.”** Once you take in that full breath, you might not know what to do with it. Instead of holding it in, use that breath to support your words, letting it out steadily while you are speaking. I like to use a sushi analogy. Picture a piece of sashimi: a thin slice of fish over a bed of rice. Think of your voice as the fish, and your breath as the bed of rice. In order to support the voice, you need a constant, full breath of air through the entire sentence. What happens when the fish is longer than the rice? It flops over — and that’s exactly what our voice does when our breath trails off at the end of the sentence, creating vocal fry. So when you speak, practice exhaling slowly while speaking and letting your voice resonate with a full, supported sound. First, practice exhaling while slowly counting: “1... 2...3...4...5...” and then practice exhaling on the words, “Hello, my name is [your name]...”
4. **Practice with a smart phone or a partner.** It’s much easier for others to hear the change in your voice than it is for you to hear it yourself. When I teach corporate workshops, I ask participants

to find a partner and practice two different ways of speaking: first, introduce themselves using their “normal” voice, and then take a few deep breaths and introduce themselves using the deep breathing method above. Participants don’t always hear the difference in themselves, but they often hear the difference in their partner, whose voice sounds richer, fuller, and more confident. You can do the same thing in your office with a colleague or record yourself on your smart phone. I’ve tried this technique in English, Mandarin Chinese, and other languages, and we can all hear the difference.

How often should you breathe? At the very least, at the end of every sentence! If you are prone to rushing through your speech or presentation, then practice breathing at every punctuation mark — it will force you to slow down.

How often should you breathe *using this technique*? You don’t need to use it all the time. Rather, practice this technique slowly, in the privacy of your home or office, until you can do it easily. After that, airplanes are a great place to practice breathing, followed by those endless meetings or conference calls. Practice a few deep breaths at a time, then relax and breathe normally. For 2 minutes a day in the morning, practice speaking the sentence “Hello my name is [your name]” while exhaling slowly. Over time, you can breathe quickly and discreetly between sentences, and it will also calm your nerves before stressful situations such as speeches or difficult conversations.

It’s not about trying to sound like someone else; it’s about giving your voice the richness and fullness it deserves every single time you speak in public, so that the power of your voice matches the power of your words. If you do that, people will listen.

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