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Your guide to be a confident and effective speaker

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# Speak Up! A Guide to Voice Projection

by [Kate Peters](#)

I was listening to a young speaker conducting a microphone check for a presentation before a large meeting.

People at the back of the room kept saying, "Project!" and "Louder, please." We were already having trouble hearing the speaker, even before the room was full of people, but their approach wasn't working.

Frankly, I wasn't surprised. Just telling someone to yell doesn't solve the problem of projection. Similarly, just speaking louder doesn't create a powerful voice.

## The Three Key Components of a Powerful Sound

The key components of a powerful sound are:

1. personality,
2. passion, and
3. strong vocal physique.

The first two components are achieved by being yourself and by being clear about your intention. The third, through awareness and practice.



## 1. Personality

Personality is “you” and the unique gifts you share with your audience. Personality is the unique imprint your thought leaves on your voice, making it distinguishable from other voices and revealing things about your particular experiences and perspective. You cannot escape the revelatory nature of your voice. The essence of who you are is in your voice for all to hear.

If you want to be heard, it's vital that you celebrate your authentic self. In a [New York Times interview](#) Ursula Burns, the impressive new head of Xerox Corporation, wisely remarked, “I can't try to say it in somebody else's voice. I have to say it in my voice.”

## 2. Passion

Passion is the power of intention aligned with content and personality. We have already covered personality, so what about intention and content?

Content is simply what you have to say. It's your message, your words, your ideas manifested in spoken form. Intention, on the other hand, is what you have in mind to do or bring about. It is why you are speaking in the first place, why you are standing in front of an audience, what you hope to accomplish. When intention, content and personality align, we have passion. And when there is passion, powerful things happen.

When a speaker is passionate, they seem authentic and genuine. For that reason, actors are trained to pour intent in their lines and speak with passion. We are so tuned in to this aspect of voices that babies as young as six months old can discern intention in voices. I have [written about this subject](#) in my blog.

If your intention is unclear, if it conflicts with your message or even with the reason people *think* you are there, your vocal power will diminish and you'll lose your audience.

## 3. Strong Vocal Physique

Strong vocal physique is the ability to produce a vibrantly resonant sound and to have a good command of breathing technique.

**“Speaking louder doesn't create a powerful voice.”**

Because sound travels on air, resonance and air are intimately connected in the voice. In an earlier *Six Minutes* article, I focus on [good breathing technique for speaking](#). This is important because air itself makes the voice work. As you exhale, air moves from your lungs through your

trachea (or windpipe). It then passes between your vocal folds (also called arytenoids and vocal cords) and brings those muscles together. As they vibrate, sound happens. You use your throat, tongue, lips, and jaw to shape the sound into words.

Now, if someone tells you to speak up, there is a good chance you will use more air as you increase your volume. That's an improvement. But speaking more loudly may just come across as yelling — and you also risk straining your voice. It is more correct to suggest that you stand up straight, take a big breath, and use more air to carry the sound as you speak up, but that is a very long set of instructions for even the best of sound men! Better that you know what “project” means so you do it right.

## Developing Resonance through Awareness and Practice

Resonance is the reverberation or repetition of sound in the environment in which it was created. When someone speaks, resonance is created in the body as well as in the surrounding area. The resonance in the body can be felt by the speaker. The two extremes of resonance are “head voice,” which is where high sounds resonate, and “chest voice,” which is where low sounds resonate.

However, most sounds the human voice makes can also resonate in the mask, or the front of the face. A voice with plenty of mask resonance is strong, and clear, no matter how loud or soft. A voice with good mask resonance is pleasant to listen to and flexible, allowing for rich vocal variety.

Mask resonance is a combination of nasal and mouth resonance. The sound you are looking for will produce a pronounced vibration in the front of your face.

### Exercise...

Try it now. Say “Mmmmm.” See if you can feel the buzzy sensation in the front of your face. (I've had a lot of fun doing this on radio interviews.) That's mask resonance. Another way to produce it is to simply say “Mmm-hmm,” like an enthusiastic “yes.” Now say, “Mmm-hmm one. Mmm-hmm two. Mmm-hmm three.” Can you feel that sensation carry over into the words “one,” “two,” and “three?”

### Daily Practice...

Use mask resonance at the beginning of a sentence and try to keep that sensation in the words that follow. For example, say “Mmmmmm. It’s great to see you.”

Did you feel the resonance in the mask as you spoke “It’s great to see you,” or did it fade away?

Try it again. This does require some practice. Spend 20 minutes a day working with this, and add it to your awareness as you practice your presentations.

Don’t be afraid of nasal resonance, but know that you need a good combination of mouth and nose, which is why the focus is in the front of the face, not just the nose. If a voice sounds too nasal, it is as bad as one that has no mask resonance. Eventually, you will learn to use mask resonance all the time. As a bonus, [according to Swedish researchers](#), mask resonance is also good for your health.

## Being Heard

The next time someone tells you to “project” or to “speak up,” remember that projecting your voice is much more than just making it louder.

1. You project your voice by allowing it to shine with your personality, and having confidence that you have something unique to say.
2. You project your voice with passion for your message by setting a clear intention.
3. And you project your voice by developing a resonant sound that is supported with your whole body through air and energy.

When you do these three things, **you will be heard**.

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