**Show confidence and skills in oral communications and presentations**

Research shows that people form impressions about a leader’s competence in as little as half a minute. This means, within seconds, listeners will decide whether we are trustworthy, and they will do it based on our body language and vocal attributes. What we say and how we say it are equally important.

The good news is that there is plenty of hard evidence that explains how we can give the appearance of confidence and competence — even if we’re nervous or timid on the inside.

**How to Look Confident**

**1. Make eye contact**-

Making eye contact is the first step to building trust with our listeners. “Eyes play a key role in human social encounters,” according to one research report. “When humans observe others’ faces, eyes are typically the first features that are scanned for information.”

There’s a simple way to get better at this, but it takes a little work: Record ourself practicing our presentation in front of a small audience. Watch the recording, noting all of the times we look at our slides instead of at our audience. Practice, and record again. Every time we do, try to spend less time talking to the slides and more time making eye contact with our listeners. Rehearse until we have the presentation down cold.

**2. Keep an open posture**-

Open posture means that there’s no barrier between we and the audience. This includes our arms. An uncomfortable speaker might unconsciously cross their arms, forming a defensive pose without being aware that they’re doing it. Confident speakers, by contrast, keep their arms uncrossed with their palms turned up.

But our hands and arms are just one barrier. There are others to eliminate.

A lectern is a barrier. Stand away from it. A laptop between we and our listener is a barrier. Set it to the side. If we keep our hands in our pockets, take them out. An open posture takes up more space and makes we feel more confident. If we feel confident, we’ll look confident.

**3. Use gestures**-

Confident speakers use gestures to reinforce their key points. One study found that entrepreneurs pitching investors were more persuasive when they used a combination of figurative language (stories, metaphors) and gestures to emphasize their message.

Find areas of our presentation where gestures will come across as natural, and use them to highlight key points or emphasize a concept. If we’re listing a number of items, use our fingers to count them off. If we’re talking about something that’s wide or expansive, stretch our arms and hands apart. One analysis of popular TED speakers, like Brené Brown and Tony Robbins, found that they tend to bring their hands to their heart when sharing personal stories. Our gestures will reflect our feeling toward the topic we’re discussing and invite the audience to engage with we on a deeper, emotional level.

**How to Sound Confident**

**Eliminate filler words**-

Avoid words that serve no purpose except to fill the space between sentences. These are words like um, ah, like, and the dreaded, we know? Excessive filler words can be irritating to listeners, and make speakers sound unsure of themselves. Eliminating them is also one of the simplest habits to fix.

Start by studying the verbal delivery of sports commentators. The ones who are at the top of their game rarely use filler words. Instead, before speaking, they think about what they want to communicate next, and deliver their comments precisely and concisely. Listen to Jim Nantz calling a golf event, Bob Costas calling the Olympics, or Al Michaels calling a football game for great examples. After years of practice, these announcers have become skilled at delivering just the words they want we to hear.

How did they get there? By spending hours in front of the television, reviewing videos of their performances.

Use this same strategy. Turn on the video or microphone of our smartphone and record ourself presenting. Play it back. Our goal is to gain awareness around the filler words we use most. Write them down, and practice again. When we catch ourself about to use one, err on silence instead to develop a smoother, polished delivery.

**Take time to pause-**

Most people use filler words because they’re afraid of silence. It takes confidence to use dramatic pauses. A pause is like the period in a written sentence. It gives our audience a break between thoughts.

A recent story in the New York Times, for example, calls attention to the silence in between notes of a classical music piece, explaining why short pauses draw so much attention. As social beings, we are hard-wired to pay attention to breaks in the flow of communication. “We recognize the pregnant pause, the stunned silence, the expectant hush,” the author writes. “A one-beat delay on an answer can reveal hesitation or hurt or play us for laughs.”

Pauses are interpreted as eloquence — in music and in public speech. A simple way to learn the power of the pause is to choose one or two phrases in our next presentation that express the key message we want to leave our audience with. Pause before we deliver those lines. For example, “The most important thing I’d like we to remember is this…” Pause for two beats before we complete the sentence. Whatever we say next will be instantly memorable.

**Vary our pace-**

Confident speakers vary the pace of their verbal delivery. They slow down and speed up to accentuate their most important points.

Audiobooks are recorded at a moderate pace of 150 to 160 words per minute. It’s slow enough to be understood, but not so fast that the listener has a hard time keeping up. TED speakers, similarly, speak around 163 words per minute, right in the sweet spot.

But here’s the trick. The best speakers speed up to around 220 words a minute when they want to embellish a certain story detail and keep listeners engaged. When they want to accentuate a certain message, they pause, then deliver their words at a slower pace.

Take TED speaker and human rights attorney, Bryan Stevenson. He delivered a presentation that earned the longest standing ovation in TED history. Stevenson is a masterful public speaker. He constantly varies his pace to keep the audience riveted. In one anecdote about meeting civil rights hero, Rosa Parks, Stevenson sped up when he rattled off a long list of what his non-profit intended to accomplish.

I began giving her my rap. I said, “Well, we’re trying to challenge injustice. We’re trying to help people who have been wrongly convicted. We’re trying to confront bias and discrimination in the administration of criminal justice. We’re trying to end life without parole sentences for children. We’re trying to do something about the death penalty. We’re trying to reduce the prison population. We’re trying to end mass incarceration.”

Stevenson then dramatically slowed down the pace of his speech to deliver Park’s response: “She looked at me and she said, Mmm mmm mmm. That’s going to make we tired, tired, tired.”

The audience laughed, touched by the story. Stevenson’s varied and controlled delivery made a story that could have been dry and predictable, poignant and humorous. He never leaves his delivery to chance.

How can we master this skill? Let the story we are trying to tell guide we. Don’t force it, but if there’s a part in our presentation or speech where it makes sense to rattle off a series of words or sentences — perhaps a section in which we need to run through a list of details — try speeding it up. Then, slow it down as we approach our main point.

It’s the rare presenter who’s mastered all six principles of confident speaking. In fact, many speakers are unaware of them. Now that we know the secrets to looking confident in front of a crowd — practice, practice, practice. Don’t be hard on ourself if it takes more time than we expect. Some of these tactics will take a couple of run-throughs to get right, while others — like pacing — require hours of work and advanced delivery skills to nail down. Keep at it. There is nothing more influential than the power of our presence matching the power of our ideas.