

sound advice

The equipment has been checked, your notes are in front of you and the course participants are wondering whether you know your stuff. But, asks Richard Payne, have you considered the way in which what you say will be heard? Here's his 10 top voice tips for trainers.

As a trainer you already have a lot on your mind when starting a session, but have you given the sound you make a passing thought?

The answer is probably not – that is until something goes wrong or someone subsequently comments in the feedback form that they couldn't hear you, you were mumbling or your voice was a soporific monotone.

As a full time or occasional trainer the sound you make has a huge impact on learners. We spend hours pouring over our training materials yet rarely give a passing thought to the spoken element of our presentation.

An effective teaching voice is a combination of audibility, clarity and vitality and the presence of these qualities can make a big difference to the way in which a training session is perceived. Trainers sometimes assume, incorrectly, that it is solely volume which is necessary to communicate effectively.

Volume without vitality will result in a loud monotone which not only sounds boring but rarely motivates participants to listen. Conversely volume without clarity will result in a loud 'fog' causing participants to miss key points.

When trying to motivate a group to make some change in their behaviour it will be important to use changes of pitch, volume and pace whereas when issuing instructions for a test audibility and clarity will be paramount.

There may also be times when you wish to speak to an individual participant or small groups without the rest of the

room overhearing. Obviously clarity and orientation are extremely important in such situations as the volume will need to be reduced to the appropriate level for a more personal interaction.

One of the crucial differences between trainer talk and social conversation is that in conversation utterances are often fragmented and incomplete and the concept of 'turn taking' is also implicit. In a training room you will be speaking formally and making either, representations (concluding, asserting, defining), directives (questioning or requesting) or expressives (thanking, welcoming, congratulating).

The voice can play a crucial role in creating the appropriate soundscape for participants. The trainer must therefore seek to manipulate some of the key vocal variables throughout a training session. Here are 10 tips to assist you in doing just that.

1. Dramatise the delivery

For more didactic stretches of input changes of pitch and emphasising a word in each phrase will immediately improve

the vitality. A flat delivery can result in participants tuning out.

2. Use inflection when seeking responses

Inflection is important when questioning a group, testing knowledge or encouraging responses. This is particularly important if your question does not start with a question word such as: *what, how, when, where* or when you are reflecting back a question to check your understanding, for example

Trainer: (to participant) as I understand it you're asking me to clarify the key points once more? (a rising inflection is *definitely* needed here as it indicates a desire for a response. This could be a statement if a rising inflection were not used).

However this following question does not need a rising inflection as the word *how* tells the listeners a response is required.

Trainer: (to the group) How many of you travelled by car this morning?

3. Vary the volume

This technique which may be employed not only to improve variety



but to emphasise or highlight a crucial point. For example when talking about a serious health and safety issue one might deliberately lower the volume to indicate the seriousness of what you were about to tell the group.

4. *Slow down! Speed up!*

Pace is one of the paralinguistic elements which may be manipulated to great effect. Psychological research has shown that slowing down the rate of delivery improves cognition. Varying the pace of delivery can also create interest and help to inject a dynamism into the session.

Trainers should not be frightened to slow down to emphasise key concepts or introduce new theories, particularly if they are complex. As a guide you should aim to be teaching at around 120-140 words per minute.

5. *Your friend the pause*

Pausing is obviously linked to the pace of delivery. Quick speakers should therefore seek to increase the lengths and incidents of pauses within their delivery in order to slow down the word rate. Pauses can also be used to great effect after questioning and at transition points within a session. Don't be frightened to pause.

Inexperienced trainers are often too terrified to pause in case they lose control of the group but often a pause can help to settle down a chatty group! Pauses can also give participants time to reflect on what has been said.

6. *Orientation and posture*

These are two crucial principles which can assist in the transfer and reception of the voice. Orientating yourself towards the group when speaking ensures that the sound is travelling in the right direction and that participants with hearing difficulties are able to lip read. Orientation is also important so that all participants are able to read your facial expressions and respond accordingly.

Appropriate posture assists with voice production by ensuring that the muscles involved in the breathing process are unrestricted. As the majority of human speech is made with lung air this is crucial. Upright and aligned posture will assist in projecting a confident image and commanding the space.

Subjects which rely on a significant amount of chalking and talking can result in the teacher talking to the board as they write. The age old principle of **Touch** (write) **Turn** (to the class) **Talk** (only when facing the class) is worth remembering.

7. *Look after your voice*

If you have a heavy training or teaching schedule then you must pay attention to vocal care and maintenance. Your voice should last a lifetime if you look after it. Hydration is very important. Central heating and air condition can dry out the atmosphere but you must never let your throat become dry.

As a general rule have a small sip of water after every ten minutes of uninterrupted talking. Try to rest your voice between training sessions and avoid shouting. Smoky atmospheres are to be avoided at all costs. If you are congested then inhaling steam from hot (not boiling) water may provide temporary relief. There is no need to put anything in the water.

8. *Breath management*

For formal stretches of uninterrupted speech you need more breath at greater pressure. Start each major point with a full breath and as soon as you feel you are on the end of that breath pause and take another smaller breath until you reach another major point of transition.

As a general rule the breaths at major points of transition should be deep enough to feel some movement in the lower ribs at the front. Our breaths are not usually deep enough to activate the lower ribs significantly.

Yogic and meditative breathing exercises

can help to gain primary control over our breath and cardio vascular exercise can also help to improve fitness levels and strengthen the muscles involved in the breathing process.

9. *Analysis*

Recording a short section of a training session and playing it back later is a good way of analysing the sound you make. Check in particular for pacing and emphasis.

10. *Clear as a bell*

Clarity of speech is important as clear speech is crucial for comprehension. Speech is the result of resonance, obstruction or both together. Vowels are pure resonance and are carried on the breath stream. Consonants are produced by some form of barrier or obstruction to the breath stream.

Ensure you are not holding tension in the jaw as this can result in poor resonance. Open your mouth a little bit wider when training than you would do for conversational speech (check you are doing this by practicing in front of a mirror).

Pay particular attention to consonants when they appear on the ends of words (particularly t's, g's and k's.) Ensure your contact when producing consonants is clean and precise. It is advisable to exaggerate your consonant production a little bit when training. Remember clarity will help you to project the voice as it is the consonant sounds which chop up the breath stream and give sound meaning and form.

Clear speech is particularly important when using a microphone. If unclear speech is input into a microphone then the system will amplify it!

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