



The Sound of Success

Essential Elements of Effective Speech

416-922-6384 | Jay@VOICEandSPEECH.com

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Introduction

Imagine a world where every sound you make either pushes people away or pulls them in. Where people work with you or resist you, based on the sound of your voice. The truth is, you do live in that world. Your voice is working for you or against you. It can turn people on or turn them off. Your successful voice makes others want to work with you.

Some time ago, I received a call from a prospective client. The voice greeting me was strong, friendly, and confident. It sounded successful. Instantly, my instinct was, "Wow! I want you for a client!" After a pleasant conversation, I hung up the phone, marveling that my first response had been so immediate and powerful. After all, I'm a voice coach. I'm supposed to listen objectively.

Some time later, I received a voicemail that, within seconds, created the very opposite reaction. It had nothing to do with what was said. That was just a simple request for information. But the sound of this voice instantly put me on guard at a gut level. It seemed immature, suspicious and defensive. I actually shuddered and muttered to myself, "Ugh. Stay away from me!"

Now of course I don't reject clients based on the sound of their voice. That's why they're coming to me. My point is this: if a voice and speech coach can be affected so immediately and deeply by the sound of a voice, how much more must the untrained person be affected at unconscious levels by the voices they encounter?

You're probably reading this article because you want to enhance some aspect of your speech. You want your voice to be stronger or deeper. You'd like to speak more clearly and deliberately. Maybe you're not sure what needs to be improved. You just know that somewhere inside is a voice that sounds good, feels good and communicates well, a voice that's always working for you and makes others want to work with you.

Through many years of experience, I've observed that successful speakers share several common qualities. They're strong, clear, confident and resonant. When you cultivate these qualities in your speech, you begin to express who you really are, have a greater impact on others and start creating the success you're destined to achieve. That's when you have found **The Sound of Success**, and in fact, you'll have discovered so much more.

Strength

You want to sound strong. And you can. You don't have to live with a small, weak voice that fails to express who you really are. But trying to "make" your voice sound stronger will usually result in fatigue, discomfort and a sense that you're not being authentic. What strategies will help you find a strong voice that is sustainable and genuine?

The easiest part involves **grounding**. When you work with an awareness of solid ground under you, your body is more likely to relax down onto that foundation. As a result, your voice will tend to drop into your body, feeling and sounding deeper, even without changing the pitch. For some people, the effect is surprisingly immediate and very noticeable.

The most important component of your strong voice is **breathing**. Since your voice is essentially a wind instrument, it is powered by breath. To find more voice, you need to move more breath. It's a generous outward flow of breath that will engage your whole voice. Without that power, you have no alternative but to squeeze sound out of your body. As you may know from experience, that doesn't feel or sound strong.

The third element of a confident, authoritative voice is **resonance**. You don't need to lower your pitch to have a commanding voice. You need to lower the resonance. You need to cultivate sound vibrations throughout your body, especially in your torso. Speaking from your throat and mouth makes your voice sound small, high and young. Speaking with your whole body makes your voice sound full, deep and strong.

Kristen Linklater, one of the greatest voice coaches of our time, notes that the strength of the voice does not lie in muscular effort. The muscles of the voice are not big and strong. The strength of the voice lies in relaxation, breath and resonance. When you need a strong voice you must find your connection to the ground, move more breath and create more space in your body for sound vibrations.

By opening up and speaking with your whole body, rather than pushing harder and forcing your pitch lower, you unleash a voice that is clear, rich, full and very effective. You speak with real power, and your listeners will respond.





Clarity

Because you have the advantage of knowing what you're going to say, before you've said it, it's easy to assume the clarity of your delivery. Communication isn't just about content; it's about caring for the listener and making sure they get the message. Addressing potential obstacles to clarity gets you understood, consistently.

Fast rate is one of the most common causes of unclear speech. Vowel sounds are shortened and words become a jumble of consonants. Slowing the rate of your speech gives you time to form sounds accurately and gives your listeners time to absorb what you've said. Learning to breathe and relax your jaw while speaking are two of the most effective strategies for slowing down, naturally.

Mumbling often goes hand in hand with fast speech. When you speak quickly, your mouth doesn't have time to open very far. Speech sounds get distorted while being squeezed through your teeth. Practicing jaw and tongue relaxation creates more openness in your mouth and encourages more precision in the formation of vowels and consonants.

A soft voice often contributes to a lack of clarity. Sound is the medium for verbal communication. When you're not putting enough sound out there, your listeners have nothing to work with. Using more breath, feeling sound vibrations in your body and allowing your voice to fill the room will generate more power, without straining. Remember, your voice will seem louder to you than it sounds to your listeners. Get used to it.

Speaking with an **accent** sometimes makes it difficult for others to understand you. Most accents lend character and personality to communication, but sometimes they lead to confusion and even frustration. Learning to improve a few strategically selected language skills will often produce dramatic improvements in clarity. An experienced speech coach can help you identify those critical elements that will give you the most leverage for progress.

Failure to speak clearly is not a minor inconvenience; it has serious implications for your personal image and professional success. Addressing the underlying causes enables you to communicate fluently and distinctly. By effortlessly connecting with your listeners, you increase your confidence and make others more responsive to your message.

Confidence

Everyone wants to feel confident—all the time. The reality, of course, is more dynamic than that. Your feelings of confidence range from low to high, depending on the situation. So, when you need it, how do you get more confidence? Confidence is not a tangible commodity, but nor is it an abstract "something" we have no way of grasping. Confidence is a state of being. As a feeling, it already exists in your body.

One of the easiest ways to increase confidence is to practice **grounding**. You can feel stronger and, yes, more confident, just by feeling your feet on the ground. It's a simple approach yielding disproportionate benefits. One client recounted, "I had a difficult conversation with my boss last week, so I made sure I was feeling both feet on the ground, and I was surprised how strong I felt in that interaction." Being grounded connects you to your surroundings, keeps you present, and that increases confidence.

The ability to physically **relax** under pressure is the most overlooked skill of public speaking. The problems you face as a speaker are usually not head problems or content problems; they're body problems. Your hands shake, your heart pounds, you can't breathe, and so on. Cultivating the ability to be comfortable in your body puts you miles ahead of the competition. But knowing that doesn't make a difference. That state of being must be practiced, or it won't be accessible when you have to perform.

The most powerful thing you can do to increase confidence is to **breathe** well. Like most people, you already know that, but few people practice it. So, under stress, your body goes back to its habit: short, shallow, tense breaths—or even holding your breath. All the major symptoms of nervousness have a direct physical connection to breathing. If you make deep, open, relaxed breathing a habit, you have an effective tool for reducing nervous energy and enhancing feelings of confidence.

Allowing your voice to **resonate** fully is a less obvious strategy for building confidence. If your voice feels small and weak, that's exactly how you're going to feel at other levels. If you engage your whole voice, allowing it vibrate throughout your body, and sense it filling the room, you set up positive feedback that helps you feel strong, expansive and confident. The sense of "putting something out there" channels nervous energy in a constructive way. You become proactive.

There are no magic pills for building confidence. But there are critical skills you can develop to enhance your feelings of strength and presence. Yes, skills require practice, but they're proven to be effective. Mastery takes time, but it beats being a victim. So start now, and discover how it feels to have the quiet confidence of a pro.





Resonance

When asked to describe a good voice, one of the qualities mentioned most frequently is “deep.” You want a deeper voice, believing it will project authority, strength, sexiness or whatever. Assuming it’s all about pitch, you press your voice down into the lower end of its range. Then you wonder why your voice tires easily and feels uncomfortable after any length of time. Your voice always seems “stuck” in your throat, and it may actually sound higher to other people.

I agree a good voice has a certain quality of depth, but it’s not necessarily related to low pitch. It’s more about having low resonance in your voice. Think of pitch as the actual “note” you are speaking. Think of resonance as the “space” you are using to amplify the sound. Finding deep resonance in your voice requires attentiveness to three components.

The first essential is **relaxation**. Muscle tension stops sound vibrations. Tension anywhere in your body prevents the spread of sound vibrations. This restricts your voice to your throat and mouth and makes the sound seem higher. Feel the ground under you, allow your whole body to relax down onto the ground, and your voice will tend to drop into your body and sound deeper.

The second essential is **breath**. Breathing well relaxes the body at very deep levels, creates more space on the inside and keeps the channels very open. The quality of your in-breath will always set up the quality of your voice. If your in-breath is small and shallow, your voice will tend to be small and shallow. If your in-breath is full and deep, your voice will tend to be full and deep.

The third essential is **space**. Think of a bass drum. Its size and its large interior space tend to emphasize the lower frequencies of its sound. The same thing will happen with your voice if you enhance the feeling of open space inside your body.

Some people get lucky and seem to be born with voices that sound confident and authoritative. The rest of us have to develop it. You might not sound like Lauren Bacall or James Earl Jones, but the good news is that everyone, including you, has the potential for a voice that is warm, resonant and strong. With some training and practice, you can learn to relax, breathe, and be expansive, cultivating a genuine sense of depth in your voice that others will find appealing and attractive.

Exercises

You've probably noticed three recurring themes, so far: relaxation, breathing and resonance. Any approach to developing your successful voice must ultimately address these critical components. You have to be relaxed, because tension anywhere in your body distorts your voice, so listeners won't trust you. You must breathe fully, because you're a wind instrument. The quality of your voice will never supersede the quality of your breath. And you must cultivate resonance, because you've got to play the whole instrument, not just part of it.

Here are some sample exercises, one for each of those three crucial elements.

Relaxation: The Spinal Roll

Release your head forward and begin rolling down toward the ground, as though you were going to touch your toes. Imagine a rope going over a pulley. You're not reaching, just relaxing downward as far as it feels comfortable. Let go of the back of the back of your neck, your shoulders, relaxing your upper, middle and lower back, until you're hanging from your waist, head downward. Keep your knees loose.

Now take a deep breath and sigh some tension out of your body. Notice what happens to your body as you let go of the breath. Sigh out several deep breaths and with every out-breath, invite your body to relax even more. You might feel yourself getting closer to the ground with each out-breath. Enjoy that feeling.

Slowly, begin rolling back to an upright position, without lifting your head or tensing your neck and shoulders. Just unrolling until you find yourself upright again. Take a moment and notice what you've done to your body.

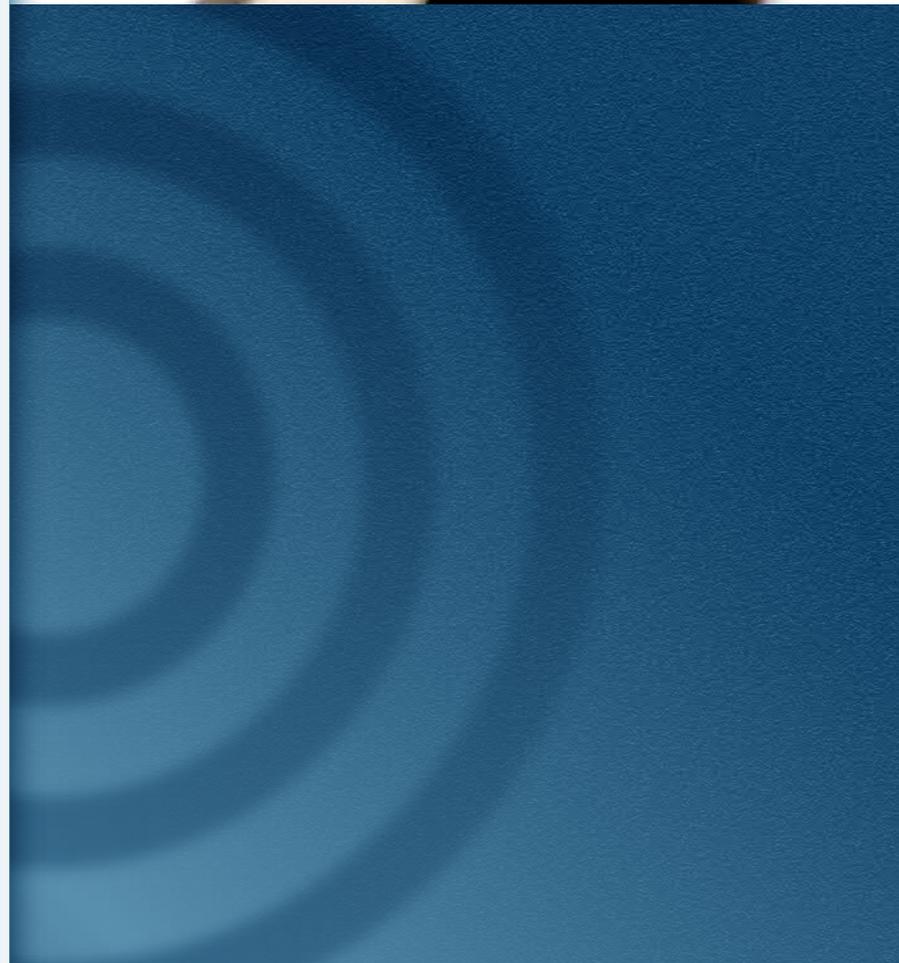
Repeat this process, trying to notice something new or do something better with each repetition. No two spinal rolls should ever be exactly the same.

As you roll and unroll your torso, muscles start to let go. You become more efficient as you grow more familiar with the exercise. You use fewer muscles to do the same task. You feel more freedom. Consider how you might speak differently, if you felt this kind of openness and freedom throughout your body.

Breathing: The Six-Sided Box

Imagine your torso as a box with six sides. You have the front side of the box (chest and belly), the back side of the box (upper and lower back), the right side of the box (armpit to waist), the left side of the box, the top of the box (your shoulder girdle) and the bottom of the box (your pelvis). Imagine all six sides of the box are moveable.

Focus on the front and back sides. Explore four breaths, imagining the front and back sides moving away from each other as you inhale and back toward each other as you exhale. Go ahead. Four breaths.





Now turn your attention to the right and left sides. Same thing. Four breaths, imagining the right and left sides of the box moving away from each other as you inhale and back toward each other as you exhale. If you can't feel it happening, just imagine it happening.

Now turn your attention to the top and bottom sides of the box. Explore four breaths, imagining the top and bottom sides of the box moving away from each other as you inhale and back toward each other as you exhale.

Of those three, front and back, right and left, top and bottom, on which one was it easiest to feel your body moving with your breath? Which of the three took more imagination?

Now wrap your awareness around all six sides of the box at once. Explore four breaths, feeling or imagining all six sides simultaneously moving away from each other as you inhale, and back toward each other as you exhale. Enjoy the sides that move really easily, and pay extra attention to the sides that don't move so easily.

Obviously, you're not shaped like a box, with so many edges and corners, but this exercise challenges you to explore dimensions of breathing you might otherwise ignore. It poses the question, "How would it feel to allow my whole body to breathe, not just the parts I'm used to? Can I allow breath into some part of my body that hasn't been receiving breath? How would I speak differently if I was allowing my body to breathe fully?"

Resonance: Noticing Sound Vibrations

Let your fingertips rest lightly on your lips. Close your eyes, concentrate on your sense of touch, allow an in-breath to flow down into your belly, then hum out a delicate "M" sound: hmmmm. Make sure your lips, jaw and tongue are relaxed. Can you feel and cultivate sound vibrations on your lips? Do the same thing with your fingertips on your nose, then on the top of your head. Can you feel your skull vibrating with sound, like a bell?

Now place the palm of your hand on your chest and sigh out an extended "Ah" sound. Can you feel sound vibrations in your chest? How about your side ribs or even your back? Now rest your arms at your sides. Close your eyes and sigh out extended "M" sounds, or "Ah" or "Oh" sounds. Can you feel sound vibrations in your body without having to touch yourself? What parts vibrate easily? What parts don't vibrate easily? Why not?

Ask yourself: How would it feel to have my whole body vibrating with sound when I speak? How would that change my experience as a speaker, or that of my listeners?

Conclusion

I've encountered thousands of people, from all walks of life, who want to speak well, and I continue to be surprised at the number of people who don't like their own voice. They believe their voice is too high, too soft, too nasal, lacking in confidence or unpleasant in some other way. To make matters worse they assume their voice can't be changed, like their height or the color of their eyes.

My experience convinces me that everyone can have a good voice. By good voice, I don't mean a big voice or a deep voice, though we do find those traits appealing. By good voice, I mean a voice that's clear, resonant, expressive, and effective, a voice that doesn't just sound good, but feels good and communicates well. It's the voice of success.

That voice is not something mechanical needing to be consciously controlled. Finding your successful voice is not a matter of manipulating pitch, loudness and quality. It's not about manufacturing results. It's about undoing unconscious habits that keep your best voice locked inside. You have a good voice. You just need to get out of the way and let it out.

Everything I know about your successful voice boils down to one concept: Openness. More specifically, an openness at three levels: open body (relaxation), open breath (breathing) and open sound (resonance). Anything you can do to relax your body, breathe freely, and allow sound to vibrate fully will improve your voice.

Finding your successful voice is an on-going process. No matter what people claim, there are no shortcuts or quick fixes, just patient, attentive training. Yes, it's just about openness, but it takes practice to stay open. It doesn't matter how much you know. It starts with what you feel, at a simple, physical level, but the effects can be far-reaching and profound.

Relaxation cultivates confidence.

Breathing enhances your power.

And resonance creates connection.

Through it all, you learn to be more fully engaged whenever you speak, and you tap into **The Sound of Success.**

A complete program of instruction, Your Confident Voice, is available for purchase at <http://voiceandspeech.com/products/mp3-your-confident-voice.html>

