

THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

Your Voice: A Tool for Success

A Valuable Asset or a Hidden Threat?

Like most professionals, you probably see your voice as a natural extension of yourself. A part of you that can't and shouldn't be changed.

You spend much of your professional life talking to others in person or on the phone. Yet you may not realize that your normal speaking voice can be a powerful asset or an unknown hindrance to the career you are using it to build and maintain.

You probably already take great pains with your appearance. But the part of you that isn't reflected in the mirror - your voice - is as much a part of how you are perceived as your clothes.

In fact, at least one study indicates that people are judged "more attractive" by others when they have a pleasing and effective voice. A number of studies have shown that "attractive" people are professionally more successful than those considered unattractive.

"With voice therapy, a person can develop a more pleasing and efficient voice. . . one which can have a positive effect both on one's work and personal life."

Pamela H. Bashor, speech pathologist

The question is, "What is a pleasing and effective voice?"

To answer, think of some of the people you enjoy listening to. They are interesting. Their voices are strong and dynamic, authoritative and convincing. These people sound like themselves, not like some image they wish to create.

". . . since most executives spend a good part of their time talking with others - usually, according to a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, 75% to 90% of their working day - a strong voice can be a valuable managerial asset." Ralph Proodian, Brooklyn College

Because such people sound believable, intelligent and persuasive, they often rise to the top of their professions more quickly than someone who sounds weak, gruff or artificial.

How can you determine whether your voice is as great an asset to your career as it can and should be?

The answer lies in hearing yourself as others hear you. Have you ever listened to yourself on tape and been unpleasantly surprised? Have you noticed that people don't pay attention when you talk?

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Do people react to you in ways that indicate that they may be misinterpreting who you are because of how you sound? (Do you, perhaps, come across as tough and unreasonable because of the tone of your voice?)

Do you run out of breath in the middle of a sentence? Does your voice get tired of trying to sound deeper and more authoritative? After you talk for awhile, or at the end of a working day, are you a little hoarse or do you feel a sore throat coming on?

If you answered "**yes**" to any of these questions, your voice probably is not as effective as it should be, and may, in fact, be a hidden threat to your career. There's a good chance you need to *learn* better ways to use it.

Professional vocal evaluation and training can help you improve the effectiveness of your voice as well as its health.

Through training, you can develop the characteristics of a powerful and flexible voice. You'll learn how to use it as a tool to express an idea or feeling, how to improve its quality, how to become aware of the images your voice conveys and their effect on other people's perceptions of you, and how to smooth a strong regional dialect (which may be a detriment in your profession) into more general American speech.

At the same time, you can learn the speaking skills that will make your voice more efficient and therefore more effective: how to find your optimal speaking pitch, achieve a balance in resonance, improve your breathing for speech, reduce the tension in your voice when you speak in public, and protect your voice from damaging abuse during long periods of use.

In fact, vocal training can be more important to you than just for image building. Vocal misuse may actually cause physical damage; and the day-to-day demands of your profession may add to the stress created by vocal misuse alone.

Each year thousands of teachers, executives, entertainers, sales representatives, and others who use their voices extensively are forced to seek medical help. In the worst cases, they have developed vocal edema (swelling of the vocal chords), polyps (growths on the chords), or nodules (scar tissue on the chords) which sometimes must be surgically removed.

In all cases, they must learn new habits which will allow them to speak naturally and effectively, without further damaging this vital tool for advancing their careers.

"Vocal suicide prevails widely in the teaching profession."

Morton Cooper, Ph.D., California speech pathologist

The person who can best teach them these improved skills is a professional speech pathologist - a person who has been educated to understand *both* how a person's voice can be used effectively *and* how a good speaking voice must work if it is to remain healthy. Such a professional often works together with a doctor in treating people with severe vocal damage.

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Even if damage has not yet occurred, this vocal therapist can help you avoid such a possibility and help you enhance your image as a confident public speaker. Through training, you can make your voice into one of your most valuable assets in building and maintaining a career.

Your voice, with proper care and skillful use, can become the powerful tool for your success it ought to be.

-PAMELA H. BASHOR, CCC-SP