

# Tips on Exercising Influence with Your Voice

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The words you choose to exercise influence are enormously important. If you've attended *Exercising Influence*, you've undoubtedly benefited by learning to frame your influence message in words that will clearly say what you intend to communicate. You may also have learned that you could develop specific influencing skills even further, skills which require wording such as envisioning language — "Here's what I believe could happen..." — posing challenging questions — "What action could you take to..." — or stating consequences — "Here's what we face if..."

As a voice coach I assert that *how you use your voice* in exercising influence is just as important as the words you speak. Your voice needs to convey the metamessage that will complement — not undermine — your influence message. How can you use your voice effectively in exercising influence? Here are some tips:

## ✓ Don't let the pitch of your voice become either high and shrill or excessively low.

These are both common vocal pitfalls. If you are apprehensive about your influence message, or nervous about facing the person you need to influence, your voice may become high and whiney. An artificially high, shrill voice will sound unconfident and inexperienced to your listener. It also could come across as obnoxious or annoying.

On the other hand, the same apprehension might cause you to speak in an artificially low tone. An artificially low-pitched voice doesn't sound authoritative, it sounds phony and "wannabe authoritative," possibly even condescending (just listen to Ted Baxter from the old "The Mary Tyler Moore Show").

The solution for either shrillness or phony lowness is to get into the habit of speaking in a pitch range which is suitable for your voice. That pitch may be higher or lower than the voices of other people, but it is right for you; speaking in that range will help your voice sound clear and confident.

Here's how to find your perfect pitch range: Slowly, say "mmm-huh" two or three times. If, as you say "mmm-huh," you feel a concentration of vibration around your lips and also at the base of

your nose, you have placed the pitch of your voice in a pitch range which is right for you. Repeat your "mmm-huh" and turn it into the word "I." Once you're comfortable with that, practice saying brief sentences while placing your voice in this fitting range: " Mmm-huh, I understand my sphere of influence."

If you say "mmm-huh" in an artificially low voice, the concentration of vibration will occur in your throat; this is not a physiologically appropriate range for your voice. If you say "mmm-huh" in a shrill voice, the concentration of vibration will be centered in the bridge of your nose — of course, your nose is not an appropriate place for your voice!

## ✓ Don't use an "up-talk" intonation pattern.

The up-talk intonation is a hallmark of "Valley Girl Speak" which some people have, unfortunately, adopted as a vocal habit. In up-talk intonation, all utterances end with an upward inflection, making the speaker sound tentative. To the listener, everything sounds like a question. For example, instead of expressing a need clearly and effectively to your manager: "I need you to approve this purchase order," the speaker says, "I need you to approve this purchase order?" This is obviously not an effective voice habit for exercising influence.

The antidote to "up-talk" is to practice saying sentences so that they end on a slightly lower pitch. Here is how to do this: tape yourself saying some short, ad lib sentences, ending each one with a drop in the pitch of your voice, *not* a rise in the pitch:

I am getting to be an excellent  influencer.

I asked open-ended  questions.

I offered a meaningful  incentive.

Listen to the recording and notice whether or not you actually came to a declarative drop at the end of each sentence. You should hear a slight lowering of pitch but not an exaggerated lowering.

### ✓ **Don't speak with a tight throat.**

As you start to deliver your influence message, you may feel your throat tightening up, which will make your voice sound whiny. To your listener, a whiny voice sounds like a demanding child. Here's the antidote: keeping your mouth closed, force a yawn. Yawn exactly as you would yawn if your manager were speaking to you and you wished to avoid yawning in his or her face, possibly appearing bored and/or rude.

Yawning, whether it is open-mouth yawning or closed-mouth yawning, expands the walls of your throat. An open throat means that your voice can travel through an expanded vocal tract, a bigger space than the space configured by a tightened throat. You *can* learn to keep your throat expanded so that your voice sounds "open," pleasant, and not "pinched."

### ✓ **Don't talk too fast.**

You might not be as effective an influencer as you would like to be if you talk too fast. According to a Gallup Poll, nearly seventy percent of people are annoyed by speakers who talk too fast. It is likely that your listener will think you sound nervous if you talk too fast. What's too fast? Common sense tells you that if words become slurred, the rate of speech is too fast. If the rate itself is a distraction and draws attention to itself, it is too fast.

Here is what you can do to ensure that you don't talk too fast. Start with something easy: count aloud from one to ten. As you say the numbers, allow your jaw to move freely. Don't open your mouth in a stingy way; open it generously. This will necessarily keep you from talking too fast and keep your words from slurring.

Caveat: This is *not* about exaggerating the movement of your *lips* or your *tongue* or about enlisting

your *eyebrows* into the action! Sometimes people overgeneralize when attempting generous mouth opening, and they overdo it. Think of this as letting your *jaw* move freely—as it wants to do!

Now practice counting from one to ten in front of a mirror; you should "see dark," i.e., you should be able to see into your mouth as you talk. You should not just see your front teeth. Once you get it, practice saying an influence message in front of the mirror.

### ✓ **Don't sound nasal.**

According to the same Gallup Poll mentioned above, nearly seventy percent of people are annoyed by speakers who have a nasal whine. If you sound too nasal as you speak, it is likely that you are not opening your mouth enough as you speak. A small mouth opening diminishes the pleasing quality which your mouth space can have on the sound waves coming from your voice box. Instead, you emphasize the effect your nasal passages are having on the outgoing sound waves. Your listener perceives you as demanding and perhaps manipulative.

You can lose the nasal quality and achieve a more pleasing voice by learning to move your jaw freely as you speak. This solution should sound familiar! The same behavior which can reduce an excessive speed in talking, can fix a nasal-sounding voice. Practice the generous mouth opening as explained under "Don't talk too fast."

Following these five voice tips will help you use your voice so that it underscores your influence message. Developing and practicing the good vocal habits can help you avoid sending a metamessage that is dissonant with your words. After all the good work you have invested in learning to exercise influence, make sure your voice is exercising influence, too.