Strategies for Effective Oral Delivery
Lecture – 18

VOCAL CUES
A voice communicates a great deal more than words alone. A presenter’s voice is a potentially powerful tool to make an oral delivery effective and impressive. Professionals whose careers depend on skilled communication take seriously the need to develop positive and powerful vocal attributes.

The quality of a speaker's voice is determined by four characteristics: pitch, volume, rate, and tone. An effective speaking voice is well modulated, meaning the pitch, volume, rate, and tone are altered to give appropriate and interesting expression to the message. A voice that is pleasing and easy to listen to is mellow, meaning it is rich in tone and sounds fully mature. It is moderate; the pitch is not too low or too high, volume is not too loud or too soft, and the rate of speech is neither too fast nor too slow.

To add to the effectiveness of a delivery, the qualities of a speaker's voice should be varied and congruent with the message. Vocal qualities should also be varied to provide contrast. In addition, since it is often perceived that the nature of a person's voice reflects something of the nature of the person, a presenter should develop and communicate with a steady, resonant, and mature voice.

Pitch
The term pitch refers to the degree of highness or lowness of a sound. Every voice has a normal pitch in terms of what is "normal" for the speaker. The norm for an effective communicator is a pitch that can be raised a few levels without sounding squeaky and lowered a few levels without sounding grumbly. Such a range allows a speaker to vary pitch for contrast while maintaining a vocal quality that is pleasing to the ear.

Pitch has a notable impact on how a presenter is perceived. In every species that makes audible sounds, the young have higher-pitched voices than do grown adults. Consequently, a high-pitched voice is associated with immaturity. An excessively high-pitched voice is shrill and unpleasant to listen to for long. A person who speaks in a high-pitched voice will be taken more seriously if the pitch is lowered.
An effective presenter uses pitch changes to indicate a change in the message. At the end of a sentence, dropping the pitch signifies a statement; raising the pitch signifies a question. For that reason, repeated lifts in pitch at the end of declarative statements create an impression of a speaker who is uncertain. Occasional and appropriate variations in pitch can be used to accentuate meaning. Rapid, frequent, and meaningless changes in pitch make it difficult for an audience to listen attentively, and may suggest that the speaker is highly emotional or frantic.

**Volume**

Listeners want to clearly hear a speaker without straining to do so and without being blasted out of their chairs. A presenter who speaks too loudly may be perceived as bombastic, aggressive, or insensitive to listeners. On the other hand, one who speaks too softly may convey the impression of being passive or insecure.

It is commonly thought that a point is emphasized by voicing it more loudly. The reverse is true. An audience is more attentive to a point that is stated at a lower (but still clearly audible) volume. Emphasis is added by lifting the pitch, slowing the rate, and/or changing the tone of voice. (Vocal emphasis is further strengthened with appropriate visual cues.)

**Rate**

An average rate of speech is 140 words per minute. As with other vocal characteristics, the rate of speech should be varied during a presentation. For emphasis, a speaker may periodically slow down to less than 100 words per minute to voice a point in a deliberate manner. To elevate the level of energy or quickly convey a point of lesser importance, a speaker may occasionally accelerate the rate to more than 170 words per minute.
A consistently slow rate of speech conveys fatigue or disinterest. Flailing speech can suggest that the speaker has difficulty formulating thoughts. Presenters who consistently speak at a rapid rate may be perceived to be nervous, impatient, or hurried.

**Tone**

The quality of tone is a combination of pitch, strength, and character. Character refers to the sense or meaning a particular tone conveys. For example, a tone of voice may be described as gentle, angry, sarcastic, childish, or serious. The tone of voice with which a speaker expresses a point says more to an audience than the words themselves. As with other vocal characteristics, tone also says something to an audience about the speaker. A faltering tone of voice is perceived as timid or indecisive, a harsh tone of voice as aggressive. A nasal tone lacks the depth that adds authority to a voice. A monotone or flat tone that lacks variations suggests a lack of interest or energy.

**Speech Patterns**

The term speech pattern refers to any vocal trait that is habitual. Although usually learned behavior, speech pattern are sometimes a reflection of a psychological or emotional condition. A person who repeatedly voices the phrase like “you know” may have acquired the habit from a peer group, or the pattern may signal that the person is nervous when speaking before a group.

Like the characteristics of vocal quality (pitch, volume, rate, and tone), speech patterns can either contribute to or detract from a presenter's effectiveness.

Some speech patterns are very pleasing and add to the clarity and meaning of a message, others are very distracting or muddle a message. The speech pattern with which presenters are most concerned are inflection articulation, fillers, pauses, and accents.

**Inflection**

Proper inflection is the practice of altering the tone and/or pitch of voice to more clearly express or magnify meaning. It is an effective communication technique that can help to sustain audience attention and make a message more memorable. Proper inflection is a speech pattern of skilled speakers who deliver each point in just the right pitch and tone.
that exactly conveys the convey of the information, how the speaker feels about the point, or how the speaker wants the audience to feel in response.

Meaningless or misplaced inflection is a barrier to effective communication. For instance, a sing-song (roller-coaster) effect is produced by a repeated pattern of gradually raising pitch when voicing the first phrase of a compound sentence; peaking mid-sentence at the conjunction (and, or, but); then dropping the pitch as the second phrase is voiced. It is meaningless to repeatedly begin sentences with a booming volume, and then allow the volume to trail off at the end, with little or no inflection on selected words.

**Articulation**

Articulation is the skill of speaking in distinct syllables. Articulate speech is characterized by correct pronunciation and clear enunciation. More articulate speech is developed by listening to articulate speakers and emulating their speech patterns, checking a dictionary when in doubt about the pronunciation of a word, and practicing enunciation exercise. Enunciation exercise stress movement of the mouth; relaxation of the lips, tongue, and jaw muscles that are used to form words; and voicing consonants clearly and distinctly.

Mumbling is a speech pattern lacking articulation. Speakers who mumble do not convey vocal vitality, they lose the advantage that skillful inflection adds to a presentation, and they may be perceived as disinterested or timid. Articulation can, however, be overdone. Precise and obviously deliberate attention to every detail of sound and syllable suggests the speaker is making too much of an effort to speak correctly, which may sound contrived to an audience.

**Fillers**

One of the more distracting patterns of speech is the use of fillers unnecessary words or phrases that are repeatedly interjected into a message. Expressions such as "uh," "um," "you know," "basically," and "it's kinda like" add no meaning. Fillers interrupt the continuity of communication. They signal uncertainty or nervousness on the part of a speaker who tries (often unconsciously) to fill up every silence with sound. The speech pattern of voicing fillers can be overcome by practicing the techniques listed below.
• Speak in shorter sentences. Avoid run-on sentences that string together several phrases joined by conjunctions. Speakers who make excessive use of conjunctions are more likely to develop a habit of attaching a filler to every conjunction, as in "and um" or "but uh."

• Concentrate on bringing each sentence to an end (period).

• Pause to breathe.

• Prepare. Know the message so well that the material comes to mind quickly and easily. Frequently, fillers are an attempt to "fill in" a gap between one idea and the next. A well-prepared speaker is less likely to experience mental gaps.

• Practice alternate words and phrases that can be used in place of fillers, such as "in addition," "on that point," and "however."

A speech pattern similar to the use of fillers is the repeated use of superlatives: exaggerated expressions such as "awfully," "enormously," "terrific," "amazing," and "awesome." Rather than adding meaning to a message, the frequent injection of superlatives can be distracting and may detract from the speaker's credibility.

**Pauses**

At one time, a soft drink was advertised with the slogan, "The pause that refreshes." Pauses in a presentation can have the same effect. While a presenter is speaking, the audience is working at listening. A moment of silence gives listeners an opportunity to digest what they have heard. Pauses help a speaker avoid the use of fillers. They can serve to slow a too-rapid rate of speech. Intentional pauses can add importance to a message. Inserted after a key point or after a particularly striking or insightful statement, a pause allows the audience a moment to reflect. "The right word," Mark Twain noted, "may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause."

**Accented Speech**

Every speaker has an accent. How pronounced an accent sounds depends upon how much the presenter's speech varies from that of the listener. Some accents are pleasing to listen to. They add a distinctive flavor to a presentation and enhance how the presenter is perceived. In other cases, accented speech is difficult for an audience to understand. Accented speech is problematic only if it inhibits a person from pursuing opportunities to present, or if it interferes with the clarity of communication. Usually, an audience indicates if a message is not clear by their feedback: quizzical facial expressions, gestures that signal uncertainty, or frequent questions that ask for clarification.

Since they are regional or ethnic in origin, accents suggest something of a speaker's background. As with other vocal characteristics and speech patterns, accented speech may influence how an audience perceives a presenter. Concern about the affect of an accent on the audience is alleviated by delivering a dynamic presentation that leaves people wanting to hear more. Presence, positive vocal qualities, and articulation offset the potential drawbacks of accented speech.
VISUAL CUES

People in an audience are viewers as well as listeners. They see a speaker before they hear the first words of a message. As with vocal cues, visual cues convey meaning, spark attention and response from the audience, and shape audience perceptions of the presenter. Skilled presenters are alert to what they communicate by facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, movement, and attire.

Facial Expressions

Standing before an audience, a presenter looks at the expressions on people's faces to ascertain audience reactions. Mentally, the presenter checks, "How does the audience feel about this point?" Likewise, an audience observes the presenter. From facial expressions, an audience derives a sense of how a presenter feels about a point and about them. Is the presenter smiling? Serious? Or wearing an expression of bland indifference? Is she grim or glad to be here? Does he appear confident or uncertain? Does the presenter appear relaxed and naturally expressive or tense and restrained? Some persons, nervous about speaking before a group, suppress their feelings in an attempt to exert self-control. The result is rigid and inhibited behavior that lacks expressiveness facially and in other respects as well. It is only by expressing how one feels about a subject that a presenter can hope to instill those same feelings in others. It does not suffice to express oneself in words alone. To have the greatest impact on audience, a presenter must express feelings visually. The excitement on a speaker's face generates excitement in an audience. An expression of concern prompts an audience to respond with concern. A facial expression that reveals anxiety causes an audience to feel anxious and uneasy.

With respect to facial expressions in particular, it is helpful to address a group as though speaking to a trusted friend one-on-one. Many people who mask their feelings when presenting are animated communicators when they "just talk" showing a range of facial expressions that would move an audience to applaud.

Eye Contact

Of all the features of the face, none has more potential for expression than a person's eyes. Making eye contact with people in an audience is important because it sends a signal that the speaker is connecting with them. Attention to eye contact forces a presenter to become sufficiently prepared so as not to be dependent on reading from notes. Meaningful eye contact distinguishes relational presenters from information-bound speakers.
To make and maintain eye contact entails more than merely looking at people. How a speaker looks at people in an audience is telling: the expression in and around a person's eyes is self-disclosing. A message and perceptions of the presenter are enhanced by meaningful and focused eye contact—meaningful in terms of being expressive, focused in terms of attentiveness to persons in the audience.

Depending on other visual cues conveyed, shifting one's eyes creates an impression of being either nervous or devious. Presenters want to avoid being perceived as "shifty-eyed," a term used to describe someone who is not straightforward. Rolling one's eyes can communicate uncertainty, frustration, or annoyance traits that are not appealing in a professional presenter. A presenter should also refrain from fixated eye contact; that is, unrelentingly fixing one's gaze on any one point or person in the room. A speaker who concentrates on notes, the top of a podium, or on visual aids neglects the audience. Fixing one's gaze on one person can make that person feel uncomfortable.

It is easier to make focused and meaningful eye contact with everyone in a meeting room when presenting to a small group. When presenting to a large audience, eye contact is made by "sweeping" the room with the eyes (similar to the way hands sweep the face of a clock). The technique is described below.

Picture that people in the audience are seated on the face of a clock. Periodically focus on different points of the "clock": to 12 (the back of the room), 3 (the side of the room to your right), 9 (the side of the room to your left), 6 (the front of the room nearest you). Move your glance to the center of the clock, and then sweep the room again. To avoid following a pattern that becomes predictable to the audience, alter the direction in which your eyes sweep the room. Although the sweeping technique does not ensure that a speaker will make eye contact with every person in a large audience, it does promote the perception that the speaker is doing so.

Presenters who refer to notes must develop skill at maintaining eye contact while handling notes. A technique practiced by newscasters is useful. Notes are placed unobtrusively at waist height. The speaker glances down to check facts (but doesn't drop the head too much), and quickly resumes eye contact with the audience. When changing from one sheet of notes to the next, the top sheet (or note card) is moved inconspicuously to the side and slipped under the bottom—without lifting, waving, or rattling pages in a distracting manner. Being very well prepared for a presentation minimizes the need to
look at notes and frees a speaker to look at the audience with focused, meaningful eye contact.

**Gestures**

Natural, spontaneous gestures are an asset to a presentation provided they are consistent with the meaning a speaker intends to convey (and provided they are culturally correct). Appropriate gestures give physical expression to the spoken word. They are symbolic in nature, in that the meaning of many gestures is commonly understood among members of the same culture. What does it mean, for example, when a person responds to a question by shrugging the shoulders? In the United States, the gesture indicates, "I don't know." It could mean differently in a different country.

In a business presentation, speaker should refrain from gesturing in ways that trigger negative responses from an audience. Pointing or wagging the index finger, for example, is impolite and potentially offensive. Pointing is perceived as parental and is often associated with scolding. Instead of pointing, emphasis can be added by gesturing, with an open hand, fingers together, palm and inner wrist turned slightly toward the audience, forearm slightly bent and extended at about a 45-degree angle to the side (not aimed directly at the audience). A point can also be accentuated by slightly raising the forearm and cupping the hand with fingers touching (in a manner that suggests the point is perched on the fingertips). When gesturing, fingers should be together (splayed fingers make hands appear larger and gestures more aggressive). The palm should be relaxed (slightly curved, as opposed to a flat and rigid palm).

Hands should never be used to grip a podium. Doing so inhibits gesturing and conveys tension. A speaker should refrain from placing hands on hips with arms bent at the elbow a stance perceived as aggressive. In most situations, hands should be out of a speaker's pockets. Speakers who put their hands in their pockets often do so because they don't know what else to do with them. From nervousness or lack of awareness, they jingle coins or rattle keys and distract the audience from the message. On occasion, when the setting is casual and a speaker wants to convey the impression of being "just one of the folks," placing hands in one's pockets (briefly) can be a gesture that puts an audience at ease. However, it is a gesture that should be done intentionally, sparingly, and only when appropriate to the setting.

Gestures are more natural when arms and hands are relaxed. When not gesturing, arms may drop loosely to one's sides, or hands may be comfortably folded (not tensely clutched) in front of the body in a manner that curves the arms forward. When a presenter uses gestures to accentuate a message, arms and hands will not stay in any one position for long.
Very expressive speakers need to take care to avoid gesturing excessively. On the other hand, stoic speakers need to add gestures to their repertoire of presentation skills. When presenting to large groups, gestures need to be expressed more expansively or they will not be seen by people seated, at a distance from the platform.

**Movement**

The influence of television has accustomed people to viewing visual images in action. A presenter is a visual image. As a rule, when a speaker remains stationary, as though locked in one place on the platform, the interest of the audience wanes. When a speaker doesn't move. People in the audience don't move—their heads, their eyes, or their position while seated. Remaining sedentary for long is tiresome, and the last thing a presenter wants to create is the impression of being tiresome.

- **Head Movement**
  A speaker's head should move. How? In a manner that reinforces the meaning the speaker wants to convey. Nodding the head up and down communicates affirmation. Shaking the head side to side signifies disagreement. Cocking the head to the side signals uncertainty, or suggests that a person is thinking.

- **Body Movement**
  A speaker's body should move. Body movement adds more than expressiveness to a presentation. It adds energy as well. Effective presenters make use of the entire platform available to them as a means of expanding their presence before a group. From the perspective of the audience, a speaker who remains in one spot is present on that one spot only. Whereas presenters who move around fill the meeting room with their presence. Movement suggests that a speaker is at ease comfortable, and confident in the presentation environment. Movement also enables a presenter to relate to an audience more effectively. By moving alternately to both right and left sides of the platform and forward toward the audience, a speaker can better make meaningful eye contact and convey connection with the audience.

The attentiveness and energy of both speaker and audience are heightened when a speaker stands. Standing, a speaker can move and gesture more freely than when seated.
Standing, a speaker can breathe more fully then when seated. A person thinks faster when standing and more easily maintains a posture that appears alert.

**Posture**

On the matter of posture, the most becoming posture is upright (not rigidly erect), shoulders back and squared, head held up. A slouching or slumped posture suggests disinterest or low self-esteem. A presenter wants to appear at ease and, at the same time, attentive and on the ready. Good posture is an attribute that contributes to a speaker’s presence.

Skilled movement avoids actions that are potentially distracting or irritating to an audience. Pacing repetitively back and forth, back and forth from one side of the platform to the other is distracting. So is rocking on the feet or swaying from side to side. Effective presenters refrain, whenever possible, from standing behind a podium.

A podium places a barrier between a presenter and people in the audience. If a podium is required, it is preferable to place it to one side of the platform, leaving the platform open for the presenter to be "out front" and "up front" with people in the audience. The speaker can move back toward the podium to refer to notes when necessary. Placing a podium at the center of a platform increases the temptation to stay behind it, which inhibits a presenter's gestures, movements, and relationship to the audience. In formal settings, the use of podiums persists. When a presenter must speak from behind a podium that restricts full-body movement, other vocal and visual cues take on even more significance than usual.

**Attire**

Few things about a presenter are as visible as attire. It is the first and most visible thing an audience sees and something they view throughout a presentation. The preferred attire, accessories, and grooming for a business presentation enhance audience perceptions of the presenter. They convey that the speaker is a credible, competent, first-class professional. Attire, accessories, and grooming should not distract from the presentation, of the message. A persuasive presenter wants people thinking and talking about what was said not about how the speaker looked or what the speaker wore. For these reasons, a presenter's attire should be clean, neat, and understated. The guidelines described below are consistent with the standards commonly accepted by successful professionals.

- **Refrain from overdressing or under dressing.** In a business setting, a conservatively tailored suit of a dark color is preferable. For men a while shirt remains the standard. A white, cream, or pastel shirt is preferable for women. Loud colors or busy patterns should be avoided. Clothing should be clean and pressed. Shoes should be shined and in good repair.
• **Few accessories should be worn.** Those that are should be relatively inconspicuous. Audience attention should be on the presentation, not distracted by large or flashy jewelry, such as glittery rings and watches or dangling necklaces and ear rings.

• **Hair should be clean and neatly styled.** Hair that is too long, too fluffed, unkempt, or that falls across the face is distracting and detracts from a professional appearance. Fingernails should be clean, well manicured, and trimmed to a moderate length. Pale nail polish is preferred. Very long fingernails painted in bright or dark colors can distract an audience when a speaker gestures.

• **Clothing of very bold or bright colors should be avoided.** Hot pink or neon green may be stylish and attractive to wear to a party, but will not create a favorable impression during a business presentation.

Appropriate attire for a business presentation is not based on personal preference or styles that are currently in vogue for social occasions. The purpose of a business presentation is not to make a fashion statement. It is to deliver a message that the audience will take seriously. They will be more inclined to do so if the presenter looks like someone to be taken seriously.

**Avoid distracting habits**

Some behaviors do not belong on the platform of a business presentation, among them those listed below.

• Never chew gum in a business presentation.

• Never smoke in a business presentation.

• Refrain from fiddling with clothing, jewelry, hair, fingernails, audio-visual equipment, or in any manner that could distract the attention of the audience.

A professional's platform behavior is always governed by good manners and courteous regard for the people in an audience.