

From The Sunday Times  
January 20, 2008

## Speak easy: it's a skill you can learn

Liz Lightfoot

### Voice coaches can help you to address large groups or communicate better with staff

MICK NICE has a cheerful, outgoing personality and a good sense of humour but lacked confidence when he had to address 600 distinguished guests at a black-tie event.

All the training he had received as he worked his way up through the ranks to executive director and acting chief executive of Basildon district council had left him unprepared for large audiences.

"As you rise up in your career you can miss out on whole areas of training, and public speaking was one of them," he said. "Some people can naturally perform, but I could see myself coming across as a stiff cardboard cut-out with a script."

The speech to the business-awards dinner went well after he sought coaching from Professional Voice, a company specialising in executive-level communication. "I was halfway through the training when I gave the speech and it made a big difference," he said. "I was more confident and comfortable – the more relaxed you are, the more you can be yourself."

Being able to communicate with clarity and authority is essential in the workplace of today, not only in formal presentations but in all business speaking situations, according to Louise Crowley, a senior coach.

Local authorities, several government departments, the Cabinet Office and the NHS all use the company's services.

Marta Lejkowski, a consultant and practice manager at Rich-mond Associates, an agency that recruits fundraisers for public bodies and charities, describes Crowley's coaching as "the best training I've ever had throughout my career".

For her it was the use of imagery that helped in stressful situations. Imagining you are talking to the trees far away and have a tail grounding you to the floor helps to give you the confidence to relax, she said.

Voice coaches say they are seeing more clients from the public services, perhaps because of the target-driven pressure on central and local government, hospitals and quangos to become leaner and more effective. The public sector is increasingly in competition with private business for contracts, which takes officials outside their comfort zone and into the uncertain world of pitches and presentations.

Christine Bennett sought help from the Central School of Speech and Drama, which is part of the University of London, when asked to address an international conference in Rome.

"I had spoken in public during my career in local government but not in an international setting with interpreters," she said. Bennett, head of Grant-Patterson Consulting, which helps human-resources departments boost their employees' performance, was director of the talent-management division of the Department for Transport at the time.

"One of the problems I had was with my notes – losing my place or getting them in a muddle – and speaking too fast. I knew I had to be clear in front of an audience speaking many different languages," she said.

She was trained by Caroline Goyder, a voice and communications coach.

"We started off with voice exercises, mainly breathing and posture, and then Caroline went through the speech with me. There would be people from all over the world at the transport conference and I had to explain our work in Britain to increase the diversity of the workforce in terms of race, age and background," she said. "My voice improved significantly and small things, such as standing firmly rooted to give you gravitas, made a difference. Caroline even managed to wean me off my notebook. I went in with just one index card of key words instead of a bundle of notes."

The school has worked with staff at seven government agencies as well as the Metropolitan Police. Goyder said that some were "band aid" clients in a panic about a forthcoming speech. Others were ambitious executives and middle managers wanting training as part of a long-term career-progression plan.

"We're seeing more and more people from the public services," she said. "It could be that the sector is now happier to fund this kind of training or it could be filtering down from politicians who have become more open about having the training.

"A lot of it is about leadership. I'm noticing more and more people in the middle level of organisations who have a good rapport with colleagues and are good listeners, but tend to put themselves down."

These people needed to put on a performance and show leadership in a crisis, she said. They needed to be sure their voices would not give away any panic as they led others through difficult times.

Voice training can also help people to move ahead faster in their careers. "Two clients who were in middle management have just had huge promotions," said Goyder.

Many employees say they are embarrassed when they hear their own voices recorded. Professional Voice's Crowley said this was because what they heard sounded very different to the voice they heard in their ears. She teaches clients to relax and breathe diaphragmatically, which helps to relax the throat and free the voice so the speaker sounds more confident and authoritative. The high-pitched, tight-sounding voice some people experience when they are nervous comes from constriction in the throat, which restricts the movement of the larynx.

People think there are good and bad speakers when in fact the voice is a flexible tool, say the coaches. You can sound any way you want to. What then matters is what you say. Often it is not what you say but how you say it that matters. Research has shown that people retain only between 30% and 40% of even the most sophisticated speech or presentation.

### **TALKING TIPS**

- Breathe low into your stomach, engaging the lower diaphragm.
- Stand with good posture, head centred and shoulders relaxed.
- Speak in a way that has relaxed energy. Speak to the opposite wall.
- Don't wear high heels – they tip your pelvis forward.
- Use gestures when on the phone to bring out the vocal tone.

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