Can you hear me at the back? Practical tips for projecting your voice (Nov 08)

Voice projection is simply the ability to speak loudly and clearly. It’s an ability that is just as important in the training room or when making a presentation as it is for actors on a stage. Jodie Hawkins says master the techniques and you will never need to ask ‘Can you hear me at the back?’ again.

The art of voice projection is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the Blackadder episode ‘Sense and Senility’ when the actors Keanrick and Mossop attempt to teach the Prince Regent the art of speaking in public. Asked to research and write this article, I thought I might save myself a job by providing a link to the said episode and the words: ‘Like this, but less so’.

Nevertheless to save the classrooms and boardrooms across the UK the sight of trainers roaring, with impossibly splayed legs, here is a slightly more publicly acceptable approach.

Projecting the voice is not just shouting louder – that can strain and ultimately damage the vocal cords – but a way of speaking that uses the diaphragm, an umbrella shaped muscle which lurks at the bottom of the stomach above your belly button. The strength of the speaking voice is marked by the amount of air that can be steered from the diaphragm through the lungs to the vocal cords.

"Projecting the voice is not just shouting louder – that can strain and ultimately damage the vocal cords – but a way of speaking that uses the diaphragm."

The first step to mastering the art of voice projection in any situation is good posture. Bad posture, slumping or hunching, can tense up the muscles used for both breathing and the voice – stand up and straight, with hips over legs and ears over shoulders, with your weight evenly balanced and muscles relaxed, and you already have a sound basis for projecting the voice.

"But the hero stands thus..."

Stand upright, the head resting comfortably above the spine. Roll the shoulders back gently and the hips slightly forward while tucking the tailbone in at the base of the spine for support. Stand with the feet comfortably apart.

Having improved posture, there are a series of simple exercises that can improve and control the breathing. Initially find the diaphragm by placing both hands, finger to finger beneath the ribcage then breathe in. The fingertips should be pushed apart as the diaphragm moves: this is what needs to move when the voice is projected.

It is important to remember that a strong voice doesn't come from the vocal cords in the throat: they shape the breath from the lungs as it passes out of the body. Vocal strength depends on the power of that breath. The inhaled air is taken down to the diaphragm and released up and outwards over the vocal cords, into the mouth to be shaped into words before being released.

Breathing exercises

Put one hand on your stomach and the other on your back, just like you are about to take a bow – now take a deep breath and try to push the hand on your stomach as far away from the spine as possible. To do this, you are taking air deep into the lungs and past the diaphragm, ensuring yourself a good supply of air on which to start speaking. This is called 'belly breathing'.
Breathe in deeply. When you exhale, say the first letter of the alphabet and continue through to Z, projecting each letter further and further away. Rest a little if you begin to feel light-headed, but by the time you reach Z your voice should be both loud and strong.

Lie down, knees and neck supported by a cushion, and put your hands on your stomach breathing in deeply and evenly. Make an 'S' sound when breathing out and keep it going as long as possible – aim for 15 or 20 seconds. Try different sounds like 'sh' or 'f'.

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"Well of course we wish you to roar. All great orators roar before communicating their speeches. It is the way of things."

Also key to good speaking are the resonators in the head that, like speakers, place and pitch the voice outwards. The larynx, nose, mouth and throat are all resonating chambers helping to focus the sound, it is their differing shapes and sizes in individuals that make us each sound unique.

Discover how to control 'head resonance focus' while speaking by holding the nose, a finger on each side lightly and hum to feel the vibrations of sound. The louder the hum, the stronger the vibrations and it is these vibrations that need to be recreated when speaking in public. Hum louder, softer, say a few words and explore the resonators, a bit like tuning a radio, till you find a frequency you are comfortable with while projecting out.

It is more than volume that is essential in projecting the voice, it's just as important to be understood as well as heard. Many people tend to speak too quickly, too low or just mumble the words so that meaning gets lost in a sea of bad enunciation. Practice speaking words or phrases that need to be clearly enunciated out loud – I eat ice-cream, effervescence, for example – stressing each syllable of each word. Try a few tongue twisters – red lorry, yellow lorry, or the sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick – to improve delivery.

Having improved posture, breathing, placement, pitch and pronunciation, it is time to project.

"Excellent, your highness; now, shall we try putting it all together?"

Take a 'belly breath' and pick a target to project the voice at – a wall, a chair, the dog/husband/wife – and practice. With repetition, the skills required to project the voice across a room and catch everyone's attention will become second nature.

Repetition is the most important tool in the art of voice projection: repeating new skills learned will eventually eradicate old habits and any inhibitions and a five-minute warm-up routine, involving the breathing and humming exercises, before any major presentation will increase vocal endurance.

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