

up beat

You're the voice

Women can be more effective managers by learning to modulate the way they speak, writes **Ann-Maree Moodie**.

The female director made a pertinent comment at the board meeting and no one reacted. Twenty minutes later, a male colleague made the same point and was applauded for his insight and nous.

Tell this story to an audience of businesswomen and you'll be met with smiles and knowing looks. Hands are raised. Similar stories are told. "We just not being heard," they say.

And indeed they're not. Literally. Women have to work physically harder than men to be heard in the workplace. If they're not in control of their voices all that hard work preparing PowerPoint slides and rehearsing a presentation is undermined.

"Men have big chests, big voice boxes and a lower range, which immediately conveys authority and gains attention," says actor Debra Lawrance, who teaches vocal technique at the National Institute of Dramatic Art. "Men get trapped in their voices, too, but because they naturally have a lower register, they don't lose the sound of authority. By comparison, women tend to use the upper register when they're trying to be heard. The problem is that upper register is used when

we're alerting danger – the obvious example is that we scream in the upper register. So if a woman is in the upper register throughout her presentation it's wearing to listen to and tells the audience she needs help."

The tool kit of any presenter – man or woman – usually consists of PowerPoint slides, perhaps a white board, their best suit and, for women, a killer pair of heels. Rarely do preparations focus on the most important item – the voice.

"Unlike actors or singers who are very conscious of their voice because it's essential to their craft, business is a very cerebral activity and the voice is rarely thought of as an instrument, a tool of business," Lawrance says. "It's forgotten and becomes rusty and tired. And this doesn't make sense when you realise that most business people use their voice in a professional capacity more than an actor."

Patsy Rodenburg, who teaches voice technique at the Royal National Theatre in London, says the way we speak and the sound we make when we speak is often more important than the message and content of the presentation. "As soon as we open our mouths to speak, we are judged,"

Rodenburg writes in *The Right To*

Speak: Working With The Voice. "Instant assumptions are made about us by others; about our intelligence, our background, class, race, our education, abilities and, ultimately, our power. What does our voice reveal about us? Quite a bit. Do we sound enfranchised or disenfranchised? Educated or uneducated? Hesitant or confident? Do we sound as if we should be in charge or just subordinate? Do we sound as though we should be heard and answered? To the ears of others, we are what we speak. For any new listener who immediately tries to 'place us', instantly decides whether or not we are worth listening to, makes snap judgments about whether or not even to listen to us."

Broadcaster and communications coach Bob Hughes says women are often "unconnected to their voice". "Women tend to speak from the head, rather than also from their heart and their belly," says Hughes, who runs a company called CorpComs. "Sometimes they're literally cut off from their body by the clothes they wear. "This season's fashion of tight pencil skirts and high heels puts women at a real disadvantage in



"Commit to your consonants" ... NIDA's Debra Lawrance. Photo: Rodger Cummins

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the workplace because on one hand they need to project a contemporary image through the clothes they wear but those same clothes are making it hard for them to breathe."

Breathing deeply and regularly is critical to gaining control of your voice. Good posture allows the breath to flow and will immediately improve the way you sound when you speak.

"Many women come to my classes because their [male] boss has told them that they 'need voice projection and physical presence' as if these things are objects that can be bought off a shelf," Lawrance says.

"I tell them if they stand up straight they'll immediately feel more confident and they'll also have the breath to project their voice."

Another tip is to "commit to your consonants". "If you sound out the word, not losing the 'd' on the end of 'and', your speech will slow and your voice will sound richer, warmer and more vital."

She runs the exercise in a seminar for women executives. One woman says she's in "riskinvestment" running her title together in one word.

Lawrence tells her to slow down, sound out each word clearly, including the "and".

We try some other examples. Suddenly "risk management" sounds very sexy indeed.

Ann-Maree Moodie is a management educator and managing director of the Boardroom Consulting Group.

presentation tips

- Be conscious of self-consciousness. If you're nervous about presenting, deep breathing will help you relax.
- Be on top of your content. Familiarity with your material helps quell anxiety and your audience will appreciate a well-prepared speaker.
- Be comfortable in your body. Good posture is important to help you breathe easily as well as to convey a message of authority to the audience.
- Be aware of the needs of your audience.
- Research your audience beforehand and make eye contact when you're presenting.
- Be aware of your voice. Breathe regularly and deeply, articulate clearly and slow down.
- Be a storyteller. Don't forget the maxim, "a beginning, a middle and an end".
- Be flexible. Read the room and adjust your energy levels to suit the mood.

Source: NIDA Corporate Performance

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