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Making The Most Of Your Message

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There's a great deal more to what you say than what you're actually saying.

How you say it — tone of voice, inflection, the rate and volume of your speech, facial expressions, body language — in short, nonverbal communication — conveys just as much as the words you speak. So whether you're giving a major presentation or just discussing an issue at a staff meeting, you should remember this:

“It's useful to think of giving a presentation in terms of physical performance, because, like an actor, a speaker communicates with far more than words,” says Gary Genard, a Boston-based consultant and trainer in public speaking and communications skills. “The key question for businesspeople is this: How can you ensure that the messages you broadcast physically increase your credibility, authority and persuasiveness in the minds of listeners?”

Here are a few key points to keep in mind.

• **Voice**, **or what Genard calls vocal dynamics**. This involves emphasis, pitch, pacing and rhythm. Your nonverbal message should match your words, he says — if you're speaking about something you consider very important, but you're almost whispering, people won't listen as carefully as if you were speaking somewhat more loudly.

On the other hand, you also have to remember the size of the room and of your audience. If you're in an auditorium addressing several hundred people, you should speak loudly, even stridently, but you don't have to yell if you're in a conference room or meeting with 10 or 12 other people.

Still, if you're feeling very strongly about what you're saying, Genard says it's only natural that you might speak with more volume.

“Volume of speech is really tied to the space you're speaking in,” he says. “That (vocal) energy should be adjusted so that you're expending enough to reach your listeners, and also in terms of the message and the fullness of the communication, the fullness of who you are.

“As listeners, we respond to that level of that energy and passion — it's a clue to tell us whether we should pay a lot of attention, and give back that same level of energy. That's one of the things that nonverbal communication does — it allows the level of commitment in your speech to come back from your listeners. It's like Newton's law — for every action there is an equal reaction. You're giving more, so more should be coming back to you,” he says.

•**Visuals, or what Genard calls visual thinking**. If you're in a small room, try not to wave your hands wildly about – he says it could turn people off and away from your message and they'll focus more on your gestures than on what you're actually saying. They might even lean away from you. Similarly, even if you're in an auditorium, but you're constantly fidgeting with your tie or your hair while you're speaking, your listeners will pay attention to what you're doing, not to what you're saying.

“If we have a subtractive gesture like fixing our hair or our clothing, people concentrate on the gesture. They're not even listening to what we're saying,” Genard says. “We live in an increasingly visual society. We are trained to focus on visual stimuli. That's why getting a handle on leveraging our visual communication is so important. People respond to us in visual ways, and it's very important for us to have a handle on what we're doing while we're speaking.”

Genard also says fluid, relaxed movements, not jerky or abrupt gestures, impart the message that the speaker is in control and knows what she or he is talking about.

He also says that if you're giving a presentation, or even speaking in a small meeting, try to avoid nodding quickly when someone asks a question, especially if they haven't finished their query. Rapid nods partway through a question send a message that you're impatient to get back to what you're saying. If you want to reflect interest in the question, nod slowly, but only towards the end or after the speaker is finished, Genard says.

•**Facial expressions and eye contact**. Even today, in a business environment that's edging toward egalitarianism, women are told more often than men to smile. Genard says you don't have to walk around like a doll with a grin pasted on your face at all times, and, in fact, a smile may be inappropriate if it doesn't match your verbal message. On the other hand, he points out, people do respond positively to a smile, and that's the whole point of speaking – you want to win people over to your side.

“The important aspect of professional situations is, is this person confident, a leader, can we be persuaded by her or him,” Genard says. “It's simply a fact that people are persuaded more by people they like by people they don't like. But that doesn't mean we should walk around with a silly smile on our face just for the sake of smiling.”

What's equally as important is looking at your audience as you speak, Genard says, no matter its size. “You need to establish a communication bond between you and your listeners with eye contact,” he says. “Don't look down at the table or your notes. Look at the people. People (who are speaking) get so wrapped up in the content of their talk. They're looking at their notes before they even start, and they don't have to when they're just introducing themselves. Establish eye contact with your audience and maintain it.”

Why is it so important? Because the audience needs to feel as if a dialogue is taking place, even if you're speaking to a group of thousands. “Eye contact tells the audience you are talking to them as individuals so they can feel free to respond,” Genard says. “That means they can give you feedback and they can feel free to ask questions if they don't understand. If you're not looking at them, then they don't feel like there's any kind of communication, that there's no bond, no conversation. And then they're less apt to respond to you, even in Q&A sessions.”

•**Stay relaxed.** How do you do this? By breathing slowly and deeply. Genard, who has a background in theater, says it's extremely important to supply your brain with enough oxygen, both so that you can think properly and so that you won't sound out of breath – which tells your listeners you're nervous and uncomfortable and probably not worth listening to.

“You have to remember to breathe,” Genard says. “In situations that make us nervous or self-conscious, we forget to breathe a lot, or we breathe shallowly, and the brain and heart aren't getting enough oxygen. Your voice isn't supported, and your listeners will pick up that clue, and you yourself will feel that you aren't nourished enough with air. The process of breathing deeply will slow down your heart and oxygenate your brain so that you'll feel calm.”

And once you're calm, he says, you can adopt a conversational tone – which will help you to win over your listeners.

“A conversational tone makes you sound like yourself,” Genard says. “We sound like ourselves and we communicate the fullness of who we are and our message by talking to people. You can't sound like something you're not.”

Also, he says, when you're calm, you tend to speak more slowly, which again conveys the message that you're in control and that what you're saying is important – and people will listen.

“It's about not losing control,” Genard says. “From the world of theater, the really exciting performers don't give you everything. There's a sense that there's more power there you're not yet seeing. That really gives (listeners) the impression of power, because if you already feel the speaker is powerful but there's more that isn't being released, that there's an even deeper reservoir, it's even more impressive.”

•**Don't sweat the small stuff.** You may have heard that crossing your arms or legs signals defensiveness and will turn your audience or listeners off or away from you. Nonsense, Genard says. It's all about physical comfort. And, once again, if you're comfortable, if you're at ease, it's a much simpler thing to bring your audience onto your side. ■

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