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## Supercompetent Speaking: 4 Tips to Maximize Vocal Skills



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The characteristics of your vocal delivery will have a tremendous impact on whether your message lands.

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By Laura Stack, MBA, CSP

As a speaker, you communicate your message through your spoken words and your body language. However, the characteristics of your vocal delivery will have a tremendous impact on whether your message lands. The most brilliant message can come across as dry and boring if delivered insipidly, whereas a dull message can come alive if delivered with enthusiasm and energy.

Your voice creates an immediate impression—and needless to say, that impression must be a good one. Among other things, it's a powerful indicator of your emotional state, including how you feel about your topic and the people you deliver it to. Rest assured that your listeners will pick up on this, and they will treat you based on what they detect. It follows, then, that you must learn to use your voice as a musician would use an instrument, to deliver your message with precise, positive emphasis.

Here are some factors you should consider when refining your vocal delivery.

1. **Use language properly.** Your message must be clear and easy to understand, or you're likely to lose your audience. It's critical that you enunciate your words fully and pronounce them accurately; to do otherwise is to come across as poorly educated or unintelligent. If you don't know precisely how to pronounce a word or how to use it in the appropriate context, don't use it at all; there are plenty of similar words with the same meaning to choose from. Never stumble, mumble, slur, or use incomplete sentences or phrases. Don't ramble: Be concise, and say exactly what you mean; fewer words with strong verbs have greater impact.
2. **Keep it animated.** A plain, boring monotone, unvarying in volume and pitch, can be the death of a presentation. Tone communicates feeling, so you need to inject emotion into your tone, using courteous, enthusiastic, and positive language to capture the listener's interest and maximize your credibility. Modulation of both pitch and volume are vital for retaining their interest. As far as pitch is concerned, a lower-pitched voice is best, because it projects authority; however, the variation of pitch via inflection is always necessary, so you can clarify points, emphasize meaning, and grab the listener's attention. Volume can be used in a similar way to emphasize points and retain attention and interest. If not using a microphone, speak loudly enough for your voice to carry to everyone.
3. **Vary the pace.** You'll also need to modulate the speed at which you speak to make your presentation more interesting. As a rule, you need to speak slowly enough to be intelligible to your listeners, yet not so slowly that you sound dull or unintelligent. Overall, I perceive those who speak more rapidly as more intelligent, better informed, and more confident, which translates into greater credibility. Furthermore, a faster pace tends to hold attention better. So mix it up a bit. Modulating the pace of your speech is an excellent way to maximize attention and interest in what you're saying. Faster speech can energize your listeners and trigger excitement; slower speech can heighten suspense and anticipation and give your audience time to process what you're telling them. Occasional pauses aren't a bad idea, either, because they heighten dramatic effect and let the audience reflect on your message.
4. **Eliminate filler words.** Verbal fillers such as "um," "er," "okay," and "like," and even intensifiers such as "really" and "very," serve a purpose in a presentation: They fill up empty space and let the speaker's mind catch up to what he's saying. The problem is, they get in the way of your message, they steal valuable time, and, well, they sound dumb. To maximize your presentation content and improve the narrative flow, you must eliminate these verbal crutches. It can be difficult to do this, since you may not recognize that you're using them, so don't hesitate to enlist a friend or coach to help you identify your use of filler words so you can work toward eliminating them. At the very least, record yourself speaking and listen carefully to the playback, so you can find and trim away the fillers.

Good speaking skills are imperative for any presenter—not just for delivering information, but for engaging the audience's attention, as well. Poor speaking skills distract the listener, making them less receptive to your message and limiting its effectiveness. So think about these vocal tips and put them into play as necessary. Remember: Your ultimate goal is to help your listeners believe what you're saying, remember what you said, be inspired by it, and go forth and do something about it!

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*Laura Stack has consulted with Fortune 500 corporations for nearly 20 years in the field of personal productivity and is the best-selling author of several books, including “Supercompetent.” She is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) and the 2011-2012 president of the National Speakers Association (NSA). Stack’s productivity-improvement programs have been used worldwide at companies such as Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Cisco Systems, and Bank of America. She is the creator of The Productivity Pro planner by Day-Timer. For more information, visit [www.TheProductivityPro.com](http://www.TheProductivityPro.com) or [www.NSAspeaker.org](http://www.NSAspeaker.org).*

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