

The VPS e-Guide to Executive Presence or: How To Speak like a CEO

By Sandra McKnight

Introduction

I've been teaching people how to speak well, how to communicate well and effectively—or communicate *better* and *more* effectively—for over 40 years now. As humans, we communicate with each other mostly one of two ways: through our speaking voice or via the written word, and often both. Obviously, as a voice coach, I focus on a person's oral communication skills. I help people speak more clearly, more concisely, more convincingly. I get them to a place where they're more comfortable speaking in public and/or speaking to others. And most of my clients are people in the business world. Not theater. Not TV. Which means they're interested less in e-nun-ci-a-tion and more concerned about convincing others that what they're talking about is interesting, valuable, worth investing in, worth listening to.



Over the past several years, it's become clear that the people who come to me have compelling ideas and great products and services, yet they also realize that what's often preventing them from getting these wonderful products and services and ideas out there has less to do with what they're offering than *how* they're offering it. Mostly, it's how they speak that's holding them back. It's their voice—their speaking voice—that needs refinement. And confidence. And clarity.



The other interesting development, and it's one that coincides with the rise of digital communications and social media, the tech industry and disruption, is that the people who've risen to the top in these various industries—whether they're CEOs, CFOs, CMOs, or people aspiring to those upper level management positions, or people wanting to be their own boss, people

who are founders and inventors and entrepreneurs—they tend to be younger, less experienced, less concerned with norms and more focused on getting things done. But part of getting things done, as many of these people have been discovering, is being able to convince others to support you, invest in you, work for you.

And these are the things that I've been blogging about for the past two years or so: how to speak more like a CEO. How to communicate more like a boss. How to develop and exude that executive presence that then allows others to hear you and your message more clearly. Executive presence isn't about faking it until you make it. If anything, that sort of approach will eventually backfire on you. Or you'll be walking around most of your adult work life feeling like an impostor (the dreaded Impostor Syndrome).



So instead of playing the role of a CEO or CFO or C-suite executive, and rather than just sounding like one—it's my belief that learning to speak more effectively is one of the keys to having an executive presence. I don't just want to help you speak *like* a CEO or *like* a boss; I want you to *be* a CEO, I want you to *be* the boss you need to be. And I firmly believe that everyone can. It takes work. It takes practice. And it's definitely a skill. But it's a skill that can be learned, and then applied. And

then over time it becomes a part of who you are. It becomes natural. Your speaking voice becomes integral to your role as a CEO, a CFO, as a founder, an entrepreneur. Your voice becomes as vital to your executive presence as your actual CV or resume or all your ideas and achievements combined.

In this short e-guide, then, I revisit some of the techniques and benefits of speaking more clearly, and how critical your speaking voice is to your executive presence, to your goal of becoming a CEO or a better leader or a more effective communicator. These are blogs I've posted over the past two years or so, but assembled here in one package. Think of it as a kind of cheat sheet, or introduction, if you've never worked with me, or for those of you who have taken my courses, it's a convenient refresher. Whoever you are—a past client, a current client, or someone who's never even heard of me or of Voice Power Studios—it's something I think will be helpful, thought-provoking, a good mnemonic, or maybe just remind you of some of the things you've forgotten about or never thought that much about. And maybe realize, Boy, there's a lot more to having an executive presence and speaking more effectively than just rolling over people with facts and figures and witty anecdotes.

Speaking like a boss, in the end, doesn't mean being bossy. It just means instilling trust among others in you and in what you are wanting to do and what you're trying to get others to do as well.

How to Speak like a CEO

I've written about this before, and it's my bread and butter and the clients I've been working with my entire professional life: how to speak like a CEO. Even if you are one already or have been for years. This chapter still applies. And when I say "speak" I do not mean talk, or act, or giving off the impression of being one. ("I'm not a doctor but I play one on TV." No. Not that. Not that at all.) I mean speaking. Clearly. Often concisely. Definitely convincingly.

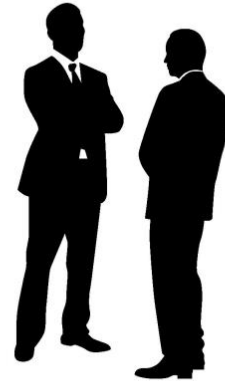


Of course, one's voice—how one speaks and talks to others—involves more than just the voice. So this chapter will touch on other aspects of how to communicate like a CEO—aspects that involve acting and talking and giving off the impression of being a CEO. But what I really focus

on—what I get you, the reader, the aspiring CEO, or the CEO who’s been a CEO for some time now—is teaching you how to speak like a Chief Executive.

Most of what I tell people comes down to common sense.

So I will first dispense with these seemingly obvious tips:



- Keep your speaking tone neutral. Don’t get “too” (too animated, too emotional, too intense): stay passionate but not too excited; intensity is fine, but overzealous can be off-putting; and if you tend to get emotional (not at all a bad thing, not even for a CEO), don’t get blubbery or weepy or depressingly sad or worked up to the point of veins popping if something upsets you (and if any of those emotions hit home in this regard: work on getting those out somewhere else, in front of a mirror, with a therapist, with your PR or HR rep—anyone other than strangers or a room full of your fellow executives)
- Make eye contact—and this goes for everyone, especially if it’s at, say, a board meeting or with a room of fewer than 20 or so people; and if it’s for a speech, with more than 20 people, just make sure to look up and make eye contact with a different person every now and then and don’t feel compelled to shake hands eyewise with every person there, then you’ll come off as, well, let’s just say it’ll do anything but connect you with your audience
- Self-deprecation and well-placed humor can be good, but try to avoid the “humblebrag”—people will pick up on it for what it is, and likely be turned off, not see you as one of them but as someone faking it and trying to come off as a regular Joe
- Know what you’re going to say and know what you want to say it. This is where practicing ahead of time what you want to say *and how* pays off in spades

- Do what so many people are rightfully advising their CEOs and CFOs and other C-suite execs to do nowadays: listen actively. Or, to reiterate a piece of advice from Ryan Crosby, professor of military science at the Rochester Institute of Technology: “Give the other person the opportunity to provide their concerns, and state your respect for their position. Listen; don’t just reload for your next volley of ideas.”

Pretty good advice. And again: very common sensical. And here’s more, from Christina Luconi, the Chief People Officer at Rapid 7, a cybersecurity firm: read your audience. Stick to the script, but don’t always stay with it—particularly if you’re looking out onto a sea of bored or distracted faces. Reengage with a face that looks friendly; regroup, go off script—tell an anecdote that backs up what you’re speaking about. Sometimes, interrupting your own rhythm can bring your listeners back into the fold.

And to this last point: know your audience. For example, if I were to write a story about speaking like a boss but it was for *Sports Illustrated*, how would I do that? Would I just talk about speaking in public? Would I only use examples based on the CEOs and venture capitalists I’ve trained? Or might I instead—knowing this would be for a magazine that’s all about sports—start off with a story about my time advising Jerry (Jerrah) Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, and how I showed him where and when to lean into his Arkansas drawl? Similarly, if you’re scheduled to talk to a crowd of automakers but your background is in safety, find some anecdote about safety that you can then apply to cars. (Not at all difficult, I would imagine.) Suddenly, you’ll no doubt discover that that story about accidents involving self-driving cars becomes much more relevant to that audience of automobile executives. And you’re still in your own wheelhouse as well. Even better, you’re starting off with a story, too. Always a great way to reel in an audience.

But there are two other points to make, and I will first say what sounds true—and is—but is not entirely helpful unless followed by what I will then provide. First the truism: great leaders speak like leaders. One: duh. Two: well, not always. But most of the time, yes.

So how is it that these great leaders *speak* like great leaders?

Three things stand out above all others:

- Simplicity (which leads to clarity)
- Powerful language (and beginning and ending your talk with power or with something—an image, a quote, an anecdote—that has power)
- Stick to your point—never dilute what you most want to convey

Again: common sense. But these are also tools to use when speaking, when wanting to speak like a boss or a CEO.

As Steve Jobs said: *“Simple can be harder than complex. You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.”*

And powerful language doesn’t mean employing words that are all about meat and potatoes, or imagistic words or phrases centered around dominance. Powerful language, in a way, circles back to the above: to clarity. To simplicity. And to my next point, which is: do not water down what it is you are saying. Don’t shilly-shally. Don’t beat around the bush. Stick to your point. (And, unlike Sam Bankman-Fried, the now-convicted ex-cryptocurrency wonder boy, do not use the word “like” with any amount of frequency—and try not to use it at all.)

Speaking like a boss, in the end, doesn’t mean being bossy. It just means instilling trust among others in you and in what you are wanting to do and what you’re trying to get others to do as well. And whether you’re a CEO, a CFO, a Chief People Officer or just starting out in the mailroom (if there are such rooms anymore), speaking like a CEO—it doesn’t mean always speaking *like* a CEO. (Again: I’m hammering home that distinction between becoming and being and speaking like a CEO—not *faking* that you’re a CEO until you actually become one.) But being able to, and knowing how to, and delivering in that way—you’ll find it not only helpful in your professional life but it’ll likely help you in your personal life as well.

“Hearing happiness in the voice of another makes us pay more attention than even hearing happiness in our own voice.”

Leadership consultant Andrea Luoma

Happy Voice, Happy People, Happy Bosses—Cementing that Relationship Between Your Speaking Voice and Happiness

Maybe it’s because I’m a singer that I just naturally know that one’s voice has an intrinsic, almost automatic relationship to happiness. Singing brings me untold joy. And connection—to myself and to others. And it’s not just based on my own personal feeling or intuition. Over the last 20 years, researchers and study after study have shown that [singing](#)—

- boosts your immune system, thereby staving off illnesses
- lowers the amount of cortisol, the stress hormone, in our bodies
- releases endorphins (the peptides that relieve pain and reduce stress)
- releases oxytocin (aka the “love hormone”) and increases our sense of connection and well-being
- assuages grief
- improves mental health and one’s mood



And lastly, and of particular relevance to my work as a voice coach—

—it improves one’s speaking abilities, especially among people who have autism, Parkinson’s, aphasia or who stutter

And what then do happier people make? For one, they’re happier individuals. For another, [happy workers](#) are as much as 20% more productive than unhappy workers. And happy communicators

communicate whatever it is they're trying to get across to others that much more effectively. And, challenging as it may be to imagine, if you're a happy CEO, a happy boss, you'll likely communicate better with your employees, your shareholders and investors, with the public, which is a win-win all around.

And I could just drop the mic here and leave it at that. But there is yet more I'd like to say and there are, no doubt, doubters out there who may not believe in this connection as strongly as I do.

In a 2020 [Forbes](#) article, "The Power of Connection Through Voice," leadership consultant Andrea Luoma put it quite succinctly: "Hearing happiness in the voice of another makes us pay more attention than even hearing happiness in our *own* voice."

Again, try to imagine yourself as a happy CEO, a happy entrepreneur, a happy disruptor pitching your world-changing app to potential investors. Won't these people, then, be more likely to get behind you, believe in you, be motivated by you? as the old saying goes: You can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar. So let that happiness flow through your body, your voice and into your audience, your listeners.

Similarly, [Nick Morgan, a communications theorist](#), pointedly asked in one of his [blogs](#), "What does the pursuit of happiness have to do with public speakers?" And he then gave the rhetorical (though, probably for most readers, a highly unexpected and counterintuitive answer): "It's a mistake to try to manage the happiness of your audience."

What!?!

I'm not supposed to make my listeners happy, you're likely thinking. What am I supposed to do, then, make them sad? Angry? Confused? Well, in order: Big no; another big no; and No yet again.

Be happy. Being happy affects your speaking voice—in a way that, duh, you will then sound happy. And not in a fake or facile or performative way. If you're faking happy, if you're trying

to just sound happy without actually feeling some foundation of happiness, then, yes—your audience will pick up on that almost right away. And you will have lost their trust, their attention, their belief in you and what you’re telling them. (And this goes back to my beef with faking it till you make it; people sniff that out as desperation, as not who or what you actually are, even if not yet; and so they lose confidence or start to wonder and question just how legit you really are.)

But be honest—come from a place of certainty, confidence, respect for yourself as much as for your listeners—and that all adds up to a form or a kind of happiness if not actual happiness itself. And that then inspires your listeners.

As Oprah has said time and again: speaking your truth not only empowers you it brings you happiness. Satisfaction. Joy. (And oftentimes: relief.) And it circles back to honesty. As [Caroline Goyder](#), author of *Find Your Voice: The Secret to Talking with Confidence*, said in an [interview](#) on *Metro* last year: “Happiness lies in being able to speak your truth. Express what you’re feeling, honestly, and with power. That’s what people we admire are doing.”

That’s why some people suggest starting off the day with a song—it elicits happiness. It gets those endorphins going. And interestingly enough, it’s US singing. There is something neurochemical, apparently, about humans hearing the sound of their own voices that releases all the good stuff inside us. Our voice is our best medicine: for ourselves and for others.

So don’t just focus on technique or process or spend so much time on the specifics of what you’re saying. Relax. Be straightforward. Be you.

As Goyder also pointed out: “It’s important to be able to express the things that matter to us. If you feel you can’t speak up, that you’re not heard, that’s an unhealthy and an unhappy state.”

So be yourself and be heard. It won’t only make you feel better, it’ll make the people listening to you feel better too.

“Everything’s more informative, not just in terms of speaking; it deepens the level of interaction. Which is what executive presence is really all about: you have a deeper presence, you have a deeper connection, and people are going to remember you more, they’re going to be more likely to invest in you and listen to you and really hear what you’re telling them.”

Kyle Forster, founder and CEO of RunWhen

The Key to Your Executive Presence Is Your Speaking Voice



Kyle Forster is intimately familiar with tech startups—and the importance of one’s speaking voice to the success of a startup, of a career in tech, in business, in board rooms, in pitches to venture capitalists, investors, potential shareholders, and just as critically: to the people on the startup team. (This is especially true, as Forster points out

below, when it comes to hiring for your startup—hiring people who often have more experienced than the founder.) Forster spent more than a few years cutting his teeth at a couple of tech giants—Google and Cisco—before going out on his own (first as founder of Big Switch Networks, and lately, as founder and CEO of RunWhen).

Forster is gung-ho about rebranding “voice coaching” (speaking better in public, speaking better, period) as “executive presence.” According to [Sylvia Ann Hewlett](#), author of the 2014 book *Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success*, executive presence is “a dynamic, cohesive mix of appearance, communication, and gravitas.” Or, as former Forbes Councils member Gerry Valentine put it in [Forbes](#), it’s “your ability to inspire confidence — inspiring confidence in your subordinates that you’re the leader they want to follow, inspiring confidence among peers that you’re capable and reliable and, most importantly, inspiring confidence among senior leaders that you have the potential for great achievements.”

Ultimately, these qualities are more or less inseparable. A client’s speaking skills play into their sense of gravitas and appearance, their ability to inspire confidence.

But what Kyle also emphasizes is the importance, yet again, of being able to speak well, speak confidently, speak convincingly as an entrepreneur or part of a startup team, and how critical this is, especially when hiring other professionals (in particular people, as he can't stress enough, with more experience than yourself) or presenting your new company or idea to a venture capitalist firm or to other potential investors.

Forster has honed his executive presence over the years via hard work and personal experience—and by listening, again and most especially, to people with more experience than he. “It’s a tough, emotional journey when you’re recruiting really senior, really strong, really experienced people who themselves were at the top of their field at every step of the way,” says Forster. “If you can’t recruit people like that, then you’re getting all kinds of first timers running the business.”

The implication of first timers being, well, that they constitute an unknown. And for investors, VCs, shareholders—unknowns do not always inspire confidence.

Even so, whether it’s people with years under their belt or newbies out of Stanford or Rensselaer Polytechnic or a high school wunderkind, no matter where they are on the experiential food chain, they all need to be on the same page, and they need to be able to speak well and clearly define what your company is and how it’s going to make other people money.

It was, in fact, a board member from Forster’s first startup who first told him about the importance of having that executive presence. “Executive presence really comes down to coming across verbally,” says Forster, who used to speak 165 words per minute.

“Dealing with board members and VCs,” says Forster, “that’s really where Sandra helped me out a lot.”

When you're making that pitch to a board, to a VC firm, to potential shareholders, "you're kind of telling them what's going to happen next," explains Forster. "And so you really don't want to invite a whole lot of questions and opinions when you're in that mode."

And as Forster describes it, there are really only two modes (mental states—or, how you are presenting your pitch) when talking to venture capitalists and other potential investors: guiding mode and receiving mode. In time and with work, Forster figured out how to switch between these two personas. "I believe that in a board conversation, there's absolutely nothing in the middle of these two modes," says Forster. "You have to be extreme in one and extreme in the other. Any time spent in the middle is ambiguous."

"The point is," adds Forster, "that with board members, you are either explaining decisions that have already been made or you are soliciting input for decisions that have not yet been finalized. You want your entire persona to reflect the mode. You only meet the board member once every two to three months, and on the other hand you have a group of people who themselves have groups of people that all need to coordinate with each other in ways that are hard to predict. Ambiguity about which decisions have been made and which are open for conversation leads to a lot of second guessing."



Again, ambiguity—the unknown: no bueno.

Why? Because if they're board members, "You only get to meet these people every three months," says Forster. "So you can't afford any ambiguity."

And one of the keys to both of these modes, to speaking well in general—ironic as it may sound—is listening.



When you listen, you slow yourself down. You pay attention more. Especially if you have learned how to also slow down your own delivery. That subliminally compels the person (or people) you're speaking with to slow down as well. And to listen more intently to what you're saying to them. The questions from your potential investors become more interesting, and so the conversation gets more interesting. And you give and receive better answers and better, more useful information.

As Forster says, "Everything's more informative, not just in terms of speaking; it deepens the level of interaction. Which is what executive presence is really all about: you have a deeper presence, you have a deeper connection, and people are going to remember you more, they're going to be more likely to invest in you and listen to you and really hear what you're telling them."

Or asking of them.

Slowing down his speaking voice allowed Forster to have better control over these conversations and interactions—without being controlling.

Before working with Sandra, Forster described himself as having been "breathless most of the time. But once he slowed down, "I realized that fast talking style was only affecting my persona, it had been setting the tone of the whole conversation, because then the other person is trying to talk at 165 words per minute, and they're breathless."

In time, "slowing down made a huge difference for me, especially in that startup stage."

Which, over time, helped hone his executive presence.

Speaking more slowly “will not only make you feel calmer and more confident – but it will also have the bonus of causing you to be perceived as more confident because confident people are not scared to take their time and space.”

Daniel Kingsley, Presence Training

Zoom Talk: How To Speak More Clearly and Confidently in Virtual Meetings, Part I

Although [Zoom](#) first went public in 2013, it probably didn’t cement its presence in peoples’ overall consciousness—and their daily lives, especially their daily *working* lives—until the pandemic hit in early 2020. After passing its 1,000,000th user in May 2013, by April 2020 (at the height of the coronavirus lockdown), Zoom had topped 300 million daily meeting participants—a figure it has maintained since then (and, if you’re into percentages—that lockdown bump represented an increase of 2900% from the year before).



According to [Notta](#), an AI-powered audio transcription tool company, “Remote work,” since the pandemic (and along with other advances in technology and changes in how we work), “made virtual meetings the norm in many organizations, and video conferencing tools became more popular.” [Also](#), according to Notta, there was this informational nugget: “Virtual meetings grew from 48% to 77% between 2020 and 2022 . . . evidence that virtual meetings have come to stay.”

So. Virtual meetings, whether they’re your thing or not, they are likely here to stay. And become even more of a staple in the worlds of business, academia and communication overall.

What’s concerning, though, for me, as a voice coach, is how long it has taken for some amount of protocol, professionalism and experience to take hold among users. (Although, not that

surprising, given that it often takes a while, sometimes years, before people truly adapt to a new form of technology—or realize how to use it and use it effectively.)

Just as telling is the *why* behind this rise in virtual meetings. Again, according to Notta, “43% of professionals consider on-camera meetings better for productivity,” and, “It is theorized that this might be connected to the fact that on-camera meetings reduce the ability of the majority of the respondents (66%) to multitask.” Perhaps even more critically apt to voice and speaking well on camera: “88% of respondents believe video meetings are suitable for training and interviews.”

And even more apropos:

- 80% of workers rely on video conferencing platforms for one-to-one meetings.
- 78% believe video conferencing is great for team meetings and stand-ups.
- Nearly 62% choose video for meetings with customers or partners.

Plus, if all that weren't enough, according to a report by the [63rd International Meeting Statistics Report 2022](#) released by UIA ([Union of International Organizations](#)), the number of virtual meetings will increase 34% in the following five years.

Again: virtual meetings aren't just here to stay, they may well become the norm and something people engage in more often than in-person meetings.

And that is the subject of this chapter (and the next): How to become a more effective speaker on Zoom and other virtual-meeting platforms.

And for the sake of brevity, I am going to split this subject into two chapters. This first part lays down most of the facts about the growing dominance and criticality of Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms and how they represent the immediate future of meetings overall; in the next chapter, I relied on the wisdom of one of my former clients, Richard Draper, a longtime broadcast television reporter, former media manager for Intel and now the New Mexico state director for a nationwide health system nonprofit.

But first a couple of quick tips for Zoom meetings in general.

As one of my speech coach colleagues, [Melanie Fox](#) has stated, in this [blog](#) for [Bold Voice](#), “clarity of your sound is key, [so] you want a strategy to help you minimize potential issues that could derail the delivery of your message or obstruct your ability to hear the meeting.” That’s as much a technical matter as it is good advice for paying closer attention to articulating what you’re saying. Meaning: make sure the mic is on, that it’s not obstructed or clogged up in any way, that there’s no outside or distracting noises (an overly loud refrigerator, an air conditioner, a window to outside traffic, sirens, street sounds, any pets or children who might wander in or cry out unexpectedly) in whatever environment you find yourself Zooming from.

Also, take a breath before your meeting begins, and whenever your turn comes up to chime in, speak slowly. Not too slowly. But try not to rush your point, your comment, your input. Breathing, as [Daniel Kingsley](#) points out, and citing what [Professor Stephen Porges](#) calls the [Social Engagement System](#), activates your parasympathetic nervous system. This simple breathing exercise (taking air in through your nose for a count of 4, then releasing through your nose or mouth for a count of 8), as Kingsley advises, allows “you to feel more confident and also more connected with your audience.”

As for slowing things down, next time you’re on Zoom notice first just how many times other people speed up their delivery. What’s your impression of them? Nervous? Not so confident? Hard to understand what they’re actually saying and hard to figure out what their point is as well? That’s what happens when we speak too fast. And speaking fast is like a snowball going downhill: the faster one speaks, the more nervous that person becomes, the faster they speak, the more nervous they get, their speaking gets faster and faster.

This is where the Power of the Pause comes in. If you remember that old [E.F. Hutton commercial](#) from the 1970s (“When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen”), it’s mostly because when E.F. Hutton spoke, he spoke in a calm, measured, relaxed pace—and people hung on his every word. Slowing down your speaking brings people in; it creates a kind of magnetism. “This,” as

Kingsley says of speaking more slowly, “will not only make you feel calmer and more confident – but it will also have the bonus of causing you to be *perceived* as more confident because confident people are not scared to take their time and space.”

Exactamundo.

And on that note I will pause—and pick up right where I left off in the following chapter: Zoom Talk: How To Speak More Clearly and Confidently in Virtual Meetings, Part II.

Voice is clearly one of the most powerful tools on a Zoom call or in videoconferencing that helps distinguish you. Especially from others who have weaker personal presentation skills.

Richard Draper, New Mexico state director for a nationwide health system nonprofit

Zoom Talk: How To Speak More Clearly and Confidently in Virtual Meetings, Part II

Now for a more personal take on speaking effectively on Zoom. As I’d said, one of my former voice clients, Richard Draper, agreed to speak to me about his experience on Zoom.

Before coming to me, Richard had already had years of training and time spent both in front of and behind the camera. As a longtime broadcast television reporter, former media manager for Intel and now the New Mexico state director for a nationwide health system nonprofit, Richard has trained plenty of others on how to speak well—with confidence and authority—on camera.

Projection

In my capacity as media manager for the New Mexico Intel site, from 1993 to 2004, part of my job was to help coach site leaders on how to speak to the press. That meant showing employees how to project themselves—their voices—powerfully to the local community.

Obviously, having come from 20 years in broadcast television news business, the projection of one's voice is key. But people tend to feel that that is natural and so they often take it for granted. Unfortunately, most people just aren't that good at it. And they could use a little bit of fine tuning in their voice and how they speak to other people.

Using your voice is a skill—like any other. A few people are naturals at it, but most people, as I have found in the business world, could benefit from coaching and from tips on how to improve their speaking voice and the projection of voice as part of their overall persona.

It doesn't come as naturally as most people seem to think. The breathing, the projection techniques, all of that is, again, not natural to most people.

It's Zoom—But It's Pretty Much TV

So people should be more aware of how they're coming across, especially in videoconferencing. During the pandemic, people started and have begun to use Zoom and other platforms like it. Whether you can see people or not, that's a factor. In the age of Zoom, visuals were added to voice. And so on a Zoom call you're on television, essentially.



And oftentimes, many employees of companies are on a Zoom call with several other boxes of people. Onscreen—like television. Some people come across strongly, other people don't. So there are some visual skills that go beyond just voice—from lighting to certain facial gestures to other things beside voice. But voice is clearly one of the most powerful tools on a Zoom call or in videoconferencing that helps distinguish you. Especially from others who have weaker personal presentation skills.

The Power of the Pause

Even today, not that many people have a lot of experience with speaking on Zoom or on other forums. Oftentimes, they slur their words or speak too quickly. You need to slow it down and use the power of the pause to be more effective over a television-like medium like Zoom.

One example I used when I taught at Intel, I used two examples of the power of the pause in communicating. And the example I liked was John Wayne. If you ever watch his old Westerns, the John Wayne movies from the 1930s, there's no pause in his voice. He talks pretty rapid fire through those movies in that period. But then an acting coach and a vocal coach told him, You know, if you pause more mid-sentence, you're going to be more interesting to people who are watching you. They'll listen more closely. And they did. And that's how he developed that style we associate with him. And that made for a much more interesting John Wayne on screen.

Modulate

And modulate your voice so it's not a boring monotone sound. Most people tend to speak in a very narrow focal range—up and down. The voice goes up, the voice goes down. That's where modulation comes in: Modulate your voice so it's not a boring monotone sound. Make your voice interesting by modulating it.

That also has to do with projection. Some people just, by nature, speak softly, and don't quite project their voice enough. And there are other skills that most people aren't aware of: breathing, how you move your mouth. These are all things that you teach: how you can project your voice, there are a number of skills that go into that.

Be Professional

You still see people doing Zoom calls from their home and whatever kind of slapdash office setting they've set up—that factors in as well. That's good to be doing these meetings from someplace you're comfortable in, but don't get too comfortable. It should still look professional. The lighting, for example. People have gotten better at that—even during the Zoom pandemic. But in the beginning, people were at home where the light levels were low or way too hot, or the backgrounds were either too busy or over time, even fake.



Over time, people started to realize what were more effective techniques to appear on Zoom over time. But be careful about self-directing. Especially if you've had broadcasting experience, you can't overdo that. No show-off stuff. No anchor voice. Be subtle.

Zoom Brands You—So Let Your Voice Be Your Brand

What Zoom and these other platforms do, they kind of brand you. Once other people listen to you, they're more likely to listen to your message. So how do you stand out in a crowd? How do you distinguish yourself? Vocal technique is one of those ways to help communicate your message better.

You always talk about having a smile in your voice. So on Zoom, exude a kind of a calm but don't over talk. My bias is that, within the first three or four seconds when I hear someone the first time, I've made up my mind about them.

Pause and Pause Again

So the pauses, as I say, that's one of the vocal tricks that I think are over helpful, but anybody on a Zoom call could benefit from these simple tricks.

If you can articulate what you do, what you want, if you can talk in a way that's confident, measured and intelligent, you can do anything.

Othman Ouenes, founder and CEO of Fidari

Tech Entrepreneur Othman Ouenes on Finding Your Voice To Tell Your Story

Othman Ouenes is one of those foresighted tech entrepreneurs who not only realized early on how critical one's speaking voice is to one's business-world success, he also believes even more firmly that the way you speak is vitally important to the success of a startup. (And beyond that, to one's interpersonal relationships—and even to oneself—as well.)

And just as critical to the success of these startup businesses—having already guided one startup to success, he's now into his second digital startup, Fidari, a healthcare platform for cancer patients. Here he talks about his path from non-native English speaker to Stanford graduate to startup wunderkind—and how crucial his speaking voice has been all along the way.

Background

I'm originally French, but I came to the US with my parents when I was young. Then I got into Stanford.

I knew I wanted to work in sort of medicine and healthcare but I didn't want to be a clinician or physician, right? So I focused on healthcare consulting.



I started my first company about 12 years ago, using software to give feedback to physicians on compliance guidelines, then used the same software to run virtual clinical trials. We sold the company, and I started this one—for personal reasons. I had been the caregiver to somebody else with cancer, so I experienced it through the lens of this patient.

Fidari

At Fidari, which means “in my home” in Arabic (I’m actually originally North African), we essentially do two things. First, we provide care-extender services—everything from patient onboarding to virtual navigation to remote patient monitoring at home. The second thing we do is, once some patients start their treatment, we build this marketplace where patients can access virtually all these services: mental health, exercise, oncology, diet, nutrition counseling, all this great stuff. So everything is in one place, and they don’t have to go seek it all out. It’s all there for them.

Finding his voice

I had a really complicated journey with finding my voice—and finding Sandra.

I didn’t speak English, and my parents barely spoke English. We were all self-taught. And early on I had a stutter. Actually, a pretty bad stutter, especially in middle school.

So I had a really hard time finding my voice and just speaking. And because of that, I was afraid of public speaking. But then in high school, I discovered debate and extemporaneous speaking. And I just dove in, into really understanding how to structure speech, how to be able to articulate my thoughts in a way that was clear and understandable to others. Essentially, I developed techniques on how to present and how to speak publicly. I really spent a lot of time on it, and I actually became one of the best executors, which was incredible. When I look back, it’s one of my biggest achievements.

I learned very quickly that if you speak well, people will listen. But being able to present to people is a combination of things, especially listening and understanding your audience. That’s really the biggest key: Who is your audience and who are you speaking to?

Speaking strategies

I always tell younger kids: Start with basic your message, your key messages—as if you're writing a paper. You're basically starting with your argument. So start your message with a thesis, then give it the three points, and literally tell people: This is my first point. This is my second point. This is the third point.

Speaking, whether it's with an investor or a customer or even just a personal conversation, you're basically starting with your argument, then you have the three points you go through. Sometimes being able to slow myself down or stop myself with that point-by-point approach, allows me to be more articulate, and not ramble, which is the death of everything.

Speaking to investors

The second company, Fidari, I told myself I want to build billion-dollar company where we can touch hundreds of thousands of patients. And in order for me to do that, I needed to figure out how to tell a compelling story. So I had to figure out how to sell this idea to investors and to raise cash from investors.

Most entrepreneurs are very technical. They come from research backgrounds. They have this great product, but they've never been in settings where they actually have to speak.

Most just have no background in actually presenting, and so much what you have to do as a founder, as an entrepreneur, is tell stories.

When people ask me, What's your biggest strength as a CEO? Or, What's the biggest thing you need to be able to be successful? One thing I always tell them is: telling a story. Storytelling, right? Who are you? Because investors don't just invest in the product, they invest in the team. They want an origin story.

Being able to obviously represent myself and my team has been so important, also being able to say that I can actually stand out there and deliver a speech or a keynote or at some point, talking to incredibly important investors. As technical entrepreneurs especially, people in this space really need to know how to tell a story.

This is where Sandra comes in. She has a very, very compelling value proposition in that way, especially for people who come from very technical backgrounds. Most have never presented in public, or probably don't have the training to actually tell stories.

Sandra shows you how to do that. Effectively. Successfully.

if you look at people who inspire today—Obama, Jensen Huang, the CEO of Nvidia. When these people talk, it feels comfortable. Those people have probably worked with someone like Sandra.

Even if it's your company, or your idea, it's not just you who needs to speak well with others

It's so important for the team to have somebody who can actually stand up there and talk, especially to potential investors. To raise cash you need to be able speak very clearly and succinctly and present your story. Why are you the best person to do it? What's the product and how are you going to make X amount of money?

Let's say, some day you get sick. You're too sick to make that pitch or give that talk. It's like, Dude, you've got to fill in. You have to make this presentation. What would be your pitch to these investors or these people you need, to convince them to back you or buy your product?

You need to be able to have a conversation with someone and listen to that person and then articulate it back to that person what they need, and in a way that's compelling and persuasive. In this world, we just don't have enough resources to teach people how to talk and present. That's where Sandra comes in. She plays an incredible role in doing that.



Sandra's value

We're a small team right now. Sandra's value to our team is that she will help everyone become their own CEO. We're all selling, we're all representing the company when we go out, have conversations, show up at these trade fairs. And so everybody needs to be able to very succinctly say what's our value, what's our product.

I really want everybody on the team to be able to meetings or presentations or out to dinner or even at their family's Thanksgiving, to be able to very clearly say, This is why this is important, and this is why it's important to me.

Sandra's process helps remind me—and my team: What's the big vision? Why is this important? Why does this get me out of bed? Finding that inner purpose, through that sort of inner voice, helps people be more motivated, more productive and ultimately become more participatory in everything. Being able to articulate that clearly from sort of your own personal narrative is incredibly important.

Everybody needs to have their own personal injection or way of telling their story—the company's story. And there is no cookie-cutter way of doing that.

Speaking your way to success

If you can articulate what you do, what you want, if you can talk in a way that's confident, measured and intelligent, you can do anything.