



Vocal quality an important issue

by Andrew Inglis

Recently I took my 5-year-old son Declan to visit his best friend Felix, who had recently re-located to Hobart.

Felix's Mum Alison, is a career educator and has been principal of some of Australia's most highly regarded schools. She lives, breathes and analyses the education process to an extent that few people apply to anything in their entire lives.

Inevitably we had some pretty intense discussions about Education vs. Training and how to make the process of both more effective and lasting. As Alison is now no longer the principal of my children's school in NSW she ventured to ask me if I had any tips for her about her delivery at school assemblies etc.

As you know this can be a tricky area in social situations and even trickier when the questioner is a perfectionist with very high standards and excellent skills. So I sat there for what seemed like minutes venturing only safe comments like, "Well your delivery is always very lively and succinct" etc.

Suddenly, through the mist of memories of her high performance, an important opportunity for Alison hit me. The Voice. No not John Farnham, Alison's voice. Although her voice always sounded clear and had good overall tone there were limitations, a sameness about it.

So in my best constructive "trainer speak", I suggested to her that there was one thing that she might work on that would make her excellent delivery even better.... the range, flexibility and timbre of her voice. As soon as I said it I realised how often this issue had been cropping up in my seminars recently. I have always thought vocal quality is an important issue but it seems there is a growing awareness and need for vocal development among our participants particularly in High Impact Presenting workshops.

For some years I have tried to shock people at Creative Training Technique seminars by sharing the results of a study on the 3 V's of Communication and the percentage influence each has on how effectively an interpersonal message is received. The statistics are Visual 63%, Vocal 30% & Verbal 7%. The shock has tended to come in two waves, the first wave being "Aren't Verbal and Vocal

the same?" Once it is explained that Verbal is the words and Vocal is the sound of your voice, the second shock wave is that the actual words have such a relatively small impact.

Recently I have found that increasing numbers of people are aware of the Vocal/Verbal distinction although the percentages still seem to create some surprise. What is also clear is that, although there is more awareness about the enormous significance of Vocal sounds in delivery, very few people have any clear strategies for doing anything about it.

The same was true for Alison. As soon as I mentioned improving her voice to this leading career educator, she latched onto it immediately. She was already aware but her next sentence was, "But what can I do about it? I was born this way."

This is an extremely widely held belief when it comes to voice, but the reality is that it conforms to the same parameters as other physical skills. In fact it has far more potency than many other skills in that most of us learn to talk at a very early age, can do it and practise every day of our lives. Our capabilities for most other physical skills are far more variable and get far less application. Therein, of course, lies the bulk of the problem. We have learnt so thoroughly that if we have learnt limiting habits it is very hard to imagine changing them. We tend to believe they are a part of us.

So this is where some "shock therapy" became necessary to shift Alison's "I was born this way" paradigm. I suggested that her major limiting vocal characteristic was breathing like a smoker, that is, partial, short and shallow. If she worked on breathing more fully and allowing that breath to pass over her vocal chords she could revolutionise the way her voice sounds and feels.

Again Alison responded to this potentially confronting observation with acceptance and the perennial question, "OK, so how do I do it?" The rest is history.

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