



GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE MEETING – LEGALLY SPEAKING!

Maybe you have seen the stuff of meeting nightmares? The powerful woman at the all important assembly who addresses the gathered throng in an apologetic foetal position – producing a shrill unattractive voice to boot. Not a good look at the best of times. Not a great sound either.

This approach is not going to get your point across at the meeting and it will certainly not win the battle of the sexes in the boardroom or win the case in court. **Wendy Smith** explains how there is a better way...

The good news is that there are plenty more women out there in all professions putting their points across in boardrooms, meeting rooms and presenting at conferences. As the face of the working world transforms with more (possibly many would argue not enough) the gender balance is slowly tipping the female direction.

Indeed according to US writer Dianna Boohe in the States women take up half the professional workforce and women comprise 35% of the country's 51 million shareholders. So never before has it been so important for women to get their point across successfully to ensure that figure continues upwards.

The chattering gender

Soundbite science is not always on the female's side. Theories, some may say myths, have been put around that women talk three times more than men. Apparently men are just plain competitive and women simply cooperative conversationalists.

But hold on there. These ideas that men conquer and women care can so often be disproved with endless examples of both sexes presenting with exactly the opposite behaviour. What is different is that there are still more men in the workforce and men in meeting with positions of power. Getting yourself heard can still be an issue.

So how to best communicate and make the most of the meeting? Sadly there are plenty of them so no one is ever short of putting techniques into practice. So what tips and techniques can women apply to get their voices and ideas arguments heard?

Voice coach Kate Terris says that the old school approach of 'sit up straight' still resonates when it comes to making the most of the sound at least. She advises, "Not only do you look in control if your posture is correct, but it is a simple straightforward way of improving your vocal delivery. In fact if you can stand up even better. This will really help oxygenate your lungs, help you breathe deeper and sound so much clearer and more confident."

In any situation where there is much to gain and plenty to lose people get tense, nervous and at a times nasty. When women get tense their voices get higher. Apart from straining the vocal cords this will have an adverse effect on the all important audience. Terris: "If your voice is straining all we hear as an audience is your strained voice – we certainly don't hear what you are saying. Often we will clear our own throats as we sympathise with the speaker's tension."

She has a simple recommendation. "One of the techniques actors often use is to simply tip your head back and swallow. This will move your larynx and therefore relieve any tension bring your voice back to its normal pitch."

Body talk tells all

When you are not speaking and making your point, as a form of communication, your body language is taking the rest of the story forward. We all know how we enter a room, hold ourselves, sit in a chair and gesticulate is ending a subconscious message to on the onlooker.

Keeping a check on your body language is a bit like driving a car. We are great at checking the mirror every few seconds and managing the gear when we start out driving after the test, but we can get a bit sloppy from there on in.

Non verbal signals are incredibly powerful ways of signally agreement, disagreement, distrust, disaffection, superiority in feeling of inferiority to those around. Charlie Chaplin and his silent movie contemporys told whole stories through gesture and body signals.

The team approach

And these same signals will be read at any business meeting. If you are working as a team presenting the same set of views, then it stands to reason that you need to look like a team. Many of us have seen examples when a member of the team is making an important point and the rest are looking down, away indeed anywhere but where they should be – at the speaker.

To be convincing as a team in a meeting it is vital that you look in tune as well as sound. This is not the time to score points against your own or show dissent on any level.

Listen to understand not just to hear

One key way of making the meeting go your way is to check that you really really know what is going on. Communications skills trainers and business coaches will all emphasize the importance of listening. Myles Downey writes in his book *Effective Coaching* that 'many of us listen not with the intention to understand, but with the intention to respond' He points out that many of us are simply listening for the speaker to draw breath so we can jump in with our opinions and thoughts. Worst still we aren't listening at all but formulating in our own heads the next clever question we can butt in with.

Listening to what the speaker is really saying, tone of voice, intonation, can deepen understanding of what they are really saying or wanting. Voice at Work's training sessions always include comprehensive exercises highlighting the effects of proper listening and the benefits that can be gain from this.

Effective Communication in any meeting is a skill that some have naturally. For others communication is an area that has been honed and crafted, others may simply need to revisit to check like driving that bad habits have not crept in. Whatever the case women in the law cannot afford to be complacent communicators.

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