Speaking with Confidence: How to Speak so that Others Will Really Listen

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What are some key issues in getting people to listen?

- Women have naturally higher voices which we all interpret as younger voices. We all perceive lower voices as conveying authority and eliciting respect better than higher voices.

- Graduate students are generally younger in age and at the bottom of the research power structure, so it can be difficult to get more senior people (faculty, post-docs, etc.) to listen to you.

- The way that you phrase your message and package it affects the way that people perceive you. For example, women in the US are socialized to speak in a less authoritative and more communal manner. We don’t always react well to women to violate these unwritten communication rules. People from other cultures bring similar socialization skills about speaking to those in authority.

- Filler words (umm, uh huh, well) confuse your message. Qualifiers (perhaps, maybe, I think, I feel, I guess) diminish your authority and present your message in a negative light. You are more likely to use these if you are unsure of yourself.
So how can you get people to listen?

- Own the Room
- Stand like a Champion
- Put your Elbows on the Table...sorry, Mom
- Tailor your Message
- Get to the Point

- Pace Yourself
- Cut out Fillers and Qualifiers
- Inject Warmth and Humor
- Let go of Self-Doubt
Own the Room

To speak from a place of strength and authority, you have to own them both:

- Acknowledge that you belong there, that you are an expert, and that you have a right to be heard.
- Don’t act as if you are being tested.
- Be confident and comfortable – you are a professional, you know your business, you are an expert.
- This is a mental exercise.
- Don’t be invisible (i.e., sit in the back, hide behind furniture, or keep your head down). Walk in confidently, take your seat at the table, introduce yourself, take up space.
Stand like a Champion

- Body language is important!
- Giving presentations and making speeches is physical.
- On stage or standing before a group, use the champion stance:
  - Position one foot in front of the other
  - Put your weight on your back foot
  - Hold your head up
  - Drop your shoulders back
  - Lean your torso slightly forward
  - Smile
- Research shows that if you stand in a confident pose, it will actually make you feel more confident!
- Women in the US and people in other cultures are socialized to be small, take up very little space, be invisible, to “not be a problem”, to “not be in the way”, etc., of someone in authority.
Put your Elbows on the Table

- Take up space! It conveys confidence and authority.
- Sit up straight.
- Lean forward.
- Put your forearms and elbows (not just your hands!) on the table.
- Maintain eye contact with fellow speakers, audience, the camera, etc.
Tailor your Message

- When preparing to speak to a group, don’t ask “what am I going to say?” Instead ask, “what does my audience need to hear?”, “what are they interested in?”, “how much do they know about my topic?”

- Telling stories can help your audience visualize, understand, and experience (emotionally!) the message that you are trying to convey. This helps them buy in and believe your message.
Get to the Point

“Your competition is the attention span.”

Prepare and practice.

Focus your message (use an outline).

Stay on topic and get to the point quickly.

Rambling and unfocused speeches make you seem uninformed, uninteresting, and unqualified.
Pace Yourself

- Professional broadcasters speak at a pace of 150 words per minute.

- A slower, more effective pace lends more authority to your ideas.

- Pause after important sentiments (to give them time to sink in) or after phrases that the audience finds amusing (try to anticipate them!).
Cut Out Fillers and Qualifiers

- Fillers (umm, uh huh, well) dilute your message, undermine your power (it sounds like you don’t know what you are talking about), and make you seem nervous/unprepared/unfocused. PAUSE instead.

- Qualifiers make you seem unsure (not authoritative) and can be cop outs for a more valuable and meaningful response.
**Top Ten Qualifiers**

- **“I think…”** or **“I feel…”** or **“I believe…”**

  These emotionally-based “discounting phrases” make you seem less authoritative and reduce the power of your words.

  **Instead of:** “I think the best option is…”
  **Simply say:** “The best option for us at this point is to…”

- **“I want to say…”** or **“I’d like to say…”**

  Eliminate these altogether.

  **Instead of:** “I want to say thank you…”
  **Just say:** ”Thank you…”, “Welcome…”, What a great job you did…”
Top Ten Qualifiers

- “I don’t know…”
  While this may be honest, you should provide a more thoughtful response. It can be viewed as lazy or unwilling to take the next step.
  Instead of: “I don’t know the answer…”
  Say: “Let me find out the answer.” or “Where could I learn how to do that?” or “Where could I find out who is in charge of that?”

- “I can’t…”
  This makes you seem rigid and unwilling to be helpful, etc. Instead, pinpoint the issue and suggest a way around it.
  Instead of: “I can’t meet then.”
  Say: “Unfortunately I have a conflict at that time. Could we meet Tuesday morning?”
Top Ten Qualifiers

“But…”

We are conditioned to listen for negative information. This word completely negates whatever you have said before. Instead, soften the message by using “and” or just start a new sentence.

Instead of: “I would like to come, but I can’t.”
Say: “I am interested in that project. I have a conflict on Monday. Could we meet Tuesday morning to discuss next steps?”

“I’ll try…”

This suggests possible failure!

Instead of: “I’ll try to get that done.”
Say: “I can have that for you next week.” or

“I don’t have time to do a quality job of this at present. Donna should be able to assist you.” or

“I am probably not the best person to work on this project. Let me suggest that you talk with Dan.”
Top Ten Qualifiers

**“I guess...”**

This is tentative language and does not reflect confidence. Eliminate it. If you have a concern, then express it directly.

**Instead of:** “I guess that might work.”

**Say:** “I am concerned that this won’t work because....”
Inject Warmth and Humor

- Be genuine – it invites your audience to listen and helps you establish credibility.

- Humor can help you connect with your audience, but beware of telling jokes. Humor based on a funny experience, funny response or poking fun at yourself (but not too much), usually comes across better.

- Practice humor – if you have a line or short story that consistently gets laughs in multiple settings, it is probably okay to use.
Let Go of Self-Doubt

- Trust yourself and the importance of your words.

- Practice speaking before peer groups – volunteer to moderate a session at a conference, give a speech at a social or family gathering, ask someone you trust to be your “audience” and practice before a big speech (it's even better if you know each other well enough for them to give you constructive feedback).
Questions?

You can find all of our presentations on the COES Graduate Seminar website at:

http://coes.latech.edu/owise/owise_seminar.php
References
