

Speaking:

your number one life skill

By Jennifer MacKay, Jump Training and Development

I have seen some top people excel at their work. While the jobs, organisations and even countries may vary, something remains the same. Those that excel share an essential life skill. It's nothing fancy. In fact it is something we do every day, often without a second thought. That skill is speaking.

What do we mean by speaking?

When you hear the word "speaking", what comes to mind? If you said making a presentation or a speech, you're not alone. We tend to think of speaking as a formal event. In other words, if we have to prepare or we are being evaluated, then it counts as "real" speaking.

But if we see speaking in this way alone, we are missing out. Formal speaking makes up a tiny part of the kind of speaking we actually do. At work, in our studies and socially we regularly participate in numerous styles of speaking from phone calls to networking. Perhaps because we speak all the time, we underestimate what it says about us.

Speaking gives us the opportunity to connect, influence, lead and learn. By limiting our definition of speaking we also are limiting our potential. And who wants that? So, let's widen our definition of speaking. "Speaking" can include all forms of verbal communication.

Speaking situations: what's your experience?

Below is a list of common speaking situations. Tick the ones you have done in the last month:

- Made a phone call.
- Participated in a meeting.
- Asked a question in a seminar.
- Spoken to a client or colleague.
- Attended a networking event.
- Negotiated a contract.
- Gone for a job interview.
- Had a coffee with a friend.

The chances are that you have engaged in a number of these. You can probably add other examples to the list too. This list covers a range of situations from relaxed chats with friends to more high pressured business scenarios. Our new definition shows us that our speaking experience

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is broader than we first thought. Because speaking is required of us so often, it is a skill that we cannot ignore.

Why being a good speaker gives you an advantage

A client once said to me "I would rather hire someone who was good at their job and an excellent communicator, than someone who is excellent at their job and an average communicator." Many employers surely would agree. Being able to connect and communicate with colleagues is essential. Academically and socially, good speakers have an advantage.

- Academically, good speakers appear confident and are able to think on their feet.

We assume that they are intelligent, well informed and quick thinkers.



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■ Socially, good speakers appear charismatic, natural and friendly. *People gravitate towards good speakers. They are often seen as stimulating company.*

■ Career-wise, good speakers get noticed. Employers appreciate those who contribute and are solution-orientated. Getting noticed raises their profile. *Managers may seek out their opinions, see them as leaders and promote them more quickly.*

When we look at it, speaking affects all areas of our life. Developing our speaking skills reaps a range of benefits.

Self assessment

Refer to the speaking situation list. Select a scenario that you ticked. Using that scenario ask yourself:

- Did you appear confident?
- Were you natural and friendly?

■ Did you get noticed?

Now ask yourself:

- What does how you speak say about you?
- What do you want people to say about you?
- What impact do you want to have? You will have spotted areas where you did well and areas where you would like to improve.

As well as developing your natural style, be adaptable to the communication needs of others. There are times when it is important to flex your style muscle

Four myths that prevent us from becoming a good speaker

Being a good speaker clearly has advantages. Despite this, many of us still believe the myths that keep us from reaching our full speaking potential. Do you recognise any of these?

Myth A: *People are born good speakers. I'll never be any good.*

Debunk A: Some people may be born with a natural aptitude for speaking. This isn't an excuse for you not to develop your skills. Watch what good speakers do and adapt their techniques to suit yourself; with practice we can all get better.

Myth B: *Nobody is interested in what I have to say.*

Debunk B: Everyone feels like this sometimes. We like to listen to people who sound confident, offer relevant and helpful comments and show an

interest in others. If you feel you are not making an impact, ask a friend or colleague for honest feedback about how you are projecting yourself. You can then make tweaks to your style.

Myth C: *I get nervous speaking in groups. I'm afraid I'll look foolish.*

Debunk C: Unfortunately the more you avoid speaking in groups, the harder it becomes. Breathe and jump in. You may find yourself relaxing a little once you get started. It may be helpful to remember that people usually have no idea that you are nervous. As bad as they may feel, nerves serve a purpose. They remind us that what we are doing is important.

Myth D: *I have an accent or English isn't my first language.*

Debunk D: This is a reason to celebrate! If you are speaking in a second language, native speakers will be both impressed and appreciative. It is important, but not essential, to be entirely fluent and accurate; you will be forgiven for not being perfect. If you are losing people, slowing down can help. Having an accent gives you an automatic advantage. It makes you memorable.

These myths are exactly that, stories we convince ourselves are true. Confronting them head on will help you to become more comfortable and confident.

You are your very own secret weapon.

Now that we have eliminated the excuses, it is time to understand your strengths.

Think of someone whom you admire. This could be a politician, a business

leader or teacher. When they speak, everyone listens. Now what is it about their speaking style that you like? You may say humour, energy, compassion, clarity; the list goes on.

What you are probably noticing is that this person is bringing the best of themselves to the forefront.

Good speakers are true to their own personalities. They build on their innate communication talents. There is no one right style. If you tend to be enthusiastic, then motivate others with your energy. If you are well considered, your thoughtfulness can aid deeper understanding. Enhance what comes easy to you.

As well as developing your natural style, be adaptable to the communication needs of others. There are times when it is important to flex your style muscle. So if you are naturally energetic, learn how to express calm and patience. If you are naturally softly spoken, be prepared to project your voice and opinions when necessary.

Seven top speaking tips

1. Voice (the 5Ps): Good speakers use their voice. The 5Ps will help you to use yours.

- **Projection:** speak so people can hear you.
- **Pace:** vary your pace to add interest.
- **Pitch:** use the high and low tones of your voice for variety.
- **Pronunciation:** enunciate and avoid mumbling.
- **Pause:** take a pause to allow listeners to keep up with you. Pauses also give you the chance to gather your thoughts. Replace "ums" and "ers" with pauses for fluency.

2. Listen: Speaking is not about constantly being on send. You also need to receive.

- Pay attention to what people say. Don't interrupt.
- Ask questions. Strive to understand other people's point of view.
- Don't monopolise the conversation. Invite others in.

3. Watch your language: Choose your words carefully and sound like a genius.

- Waffle words such as 'basically', 'like' and 'you know' add nothing to our message. They just make us sound less intelligent. Think of them as IQ thieves.
- Don't panic; waffle words are natural, but used too frequently they undermine your authority. Listen out for yours. You may find them at the beginning of sentences or when you link ideas. Replace them with pauses to sound like a genius.

4. Don't ramble: Less is more. Be concise. That's it.

5. Speak early, speak often: Have you ever been quiet for ages in a meeting or in class; then when you finally do speak the whole room turns around to see who you are? Speaking early and often makes you feel more confident. If you are stuck for something to say, ask a question, seek clarification, request an example, summarise what others have said or offer to take notes/minutes and recap them.

6. Prepare: Preparing gives you a better result. Decide in advance what you want from the conversation. Write down your key points and questions to ask.

7. Learn from others and get feedback: Becoming a good communicator is a lifelong journey. Develop your skills by observing strong speakers, taking opportunities to put yourself forward and getting feedback from people you trust.

It is hard to think of another skill that we have the chance to practice so often. Next time you ask a question in class, have coffee with a friend or make a presentation, think: lights, camera, action – you're on. 📸

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