



Watch what you say

By Paul Levy | November 17, 2016

Leaders have a multitude of ways to deliver their narratives in modern organizations. There are written pathways like memos, corporate reports, email, Twitter, Facebook. But it is the unusual leader who can rely mainly on the written word. Eventually, the person must speak.

And as we've learned from culture and history — from Professor Henry Higgins's work in "My Fair Lady" to Donald Trump's behavior on the stump — our speaking style speaks volumes about us, and can determine success or failure.

A master of delivery can use something as prosaic as a pause to sway an audience. During a campaign for governor of Arkansas, former Senator Dale Bumpers was once asked, "Dale, where do you stand on the idea of sales tax increase?"

He paused and slowly responded: "Some of my friends are for the sales tax. [A second beat.] Some of my friends are against the sales tax. [Longer beat, and then a smile.] I stand with my friends." Laughter and applause followed, as his audience understood that he wanted to wait until he was in office before committing to one side of a complex policy matter. They figuratively gave him a break because he literally gave them a break in his presentation.

Bumpers was a mentor of Bill Clinton — who, like Ronald Reagan, perfected a languid delivery and down-home, informal sentence structure that allowed him to take controversial positions on tough issues.

And we can scarcely ignore Trump's choice of words, which have differed depending on what he is trying to accomplish and for what audience. During the campaign, he was unrestrained in tone and vocabulary as he sought to rouse what he confidently felt was an aggrieved portion of the citizenry. Indeed, he used terms and phrases that would have been unthinkable for a major presidential candidate in prior years.

But compare that with the message Trump sent after meeting with President Obama to begin the transition planning. He was sober, respectful, even modest — seeming to tell the country, "I am presidential timber." How much of each approach will we see over the coming years? Some may say the answer is based on characterological impulses, but I think that much of what Trump says is carefully thought through.

The principles that govern political speech also apply to private organizations, and they're particularly important in a field that's undergoing as much transformation as healthcare. Absent effective communication

from its leader, an organization risks foundering because employees, lacking a context for their activities, don't have a way of holding themselves accountable.

The leader also has an obligation to speak for the corporation, to present a context for the institution's activities to customers, media, regulators, and others in the outside world.

Most corporate leaders aren't masters on the level of politicians or reality TV stars – and they won't be delivering addresses in front of millions. But there is one thing every leader can do: Watch what you say. I mean that literally. Many of us develop speech patterns that start as nervous time fillers but that, over time, become embedded in our delivery. We don't hear these interruptions anymore, but our listeners are distracted by them. We become less effective story-tellers.

I personally was shocked over twenty years ago to read a transcript of my testimony in an important legal proceeding. The stenographer dutifully and accurately reported my use of the word “gonna,” instead of “going to,” dozens of times during my appearance as an expert witness. I didn't realize until that moment that my repeated insertion of a slurred colloquialism acted to reduce my credibility. (Granted, today, “gonna” has become an accepted part of speech patterns, used often by our president and NPR reporters alike!)

You may have colloquialisms or fillers of your own. There is the proverbial “you know,” originally used as a question intended to engage the listener in agreeing with your point of view. It evolved into a filler, taking the place of “um” or a silent pause. I know a very fine consultant who unconsciously sprinkles her speech with dozens of “you know's,” and I have watched as her colleagues and clients visibly tense up during her presentations.

I know another seasoned executive whose “you know's” have over the years been shortened to “know.” Many listeners never get over the expostulation of what sounds like “No!” several times a minute during his presentations. He literally sounds like he is disagreeing with himself.

And, of course, Valley girls promulgated “like” as the filler back in the 1980s. When I taught college students, I would raise my hand every time anyone inserted a superfluous “like” into their questions or answers. I was (perhaps a bit pedantically) helping the students “watch” what they were saying, and their behavior was modified by this approach.

Your best friends and colleagues are highly unlikely to point out your multiple “you know's” or other speech interruptions. They worry you will be offended or your feelings hurt. Your speech pattern continues unabated.

But technology has given us the solution to this problem. Every smart phone is equipped with voice recognition software. Next time you are speaking for any length of time, turn on the app. Then read what the machine has captured as text. It won't lie to you. You'll be able to watch what you say and, with some attention, clean up your delivery and engage in a more effective narrative.

If you're going to cajole, inspire, educate, or communicate a sense of purpose, this is the way to start.

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