

Make an Impact!

The Top Five Secrets of Powerful Presenters



By Barbara Roche and Charlotte Dietz

About Us



Barbara Roche



Charlotte Dietz

We are entrepreneurs and executives who have been on both sides of the lectern. We met in 1990 when Barbara asked her talented cousin Carol and Carol's best friend Charlotte to form a girl band trio (it sadly disbanded). In addition to a love of harmonizing and size 10 feet, Barbara and Charlotte share a passion for helping professionals become more confident and powerful presenters.

Barbara is a lecturer at The Wharton School where she teaches leadership communication, persuasion, and data display. Charlotte is a presentation coach with an extensive background in community theatre and stage performance.

SpeakWell was founded on the idea that there is a better way to help individuals become powerful presenters. We work from the inside out which requires an environment that is relaxed and creative, safe and expansive. Our clients are able to take risks and try out new skills without the fear of failure. If you are ready to try this developmental approach, call us today.

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Table of Contents



1 POSTURE

Page 5



2 VOICE

Page 7



3 GESTURES

Page 9



4 PACING

Page 11



5 CONNECTION

Page 13

Introduction...

Why read this e-book?



In a hotel ballroom of 500 people, a speaker was just stepping down off the stage after delivering a 20-minute presentation. As he was making his way to the table where others from his company were sitting, his boss leaned toward the VP of Human Resources and said, “John has certainly found his comfort zone, but he’s far away from the sweet spot. He needs more practice. Get him a coach before we put him up there again. I don’t want our brand tarnished because of poor presentation skills.”

You’re probably thinking, “Ouch! I’m glad that wasn’t *my* boss.” And so are we! But, the truth is, this scenario happens all too often. And we think it’s time to put a stop to it. We think people should be praised and promoted for their excellent communication skills.

And we’re not alone. According to a national study conducted by Michigan State University in 2011, communication skills ranked #1 out of the top seven soft skills employers are looking for in the ideal job candidate – regardless of industry or specialization. Employers are looking for people who can effectively convey ideas, influence others, and “communicate pleasantly and professionally.”¹

Our goal in writing *The Top Five Secrets* is to help busy career professionals gain a competitive edge. There is no reason why poor presentation skills should derail your career. By following the tips and techniques in this manual, you will not only impress your boss, but you might also impress yourself.

“Always be a first-rate version of yourself rather than a second-rate version of someone else.”

- Judy Garland

1. Comparative Analysis of Soft Skills, Crawford, et. al., 2011



Unless some misfortune has made it impossible, everyone can have good posture.



- Loretta Young

It's a simple question. Do you want people to perceive you as:

- A. Young, confident and in command, or
- B. Old, timid and tired?

If the answer is A, then the very first thing you want to focus on is your posture. Think about it. You haven't even opened your mouth to speak the words you have prepared and perhaps even practiced, and your audience already has an impression of you.

Columbia University researchers Dana Carney, AJ Cuddy, and AJ Yap conducted [experiments](#) to prove that humans express power through open, expansive postures, and they express powerlessness through closed, narrowing postures. We're talking the basic superhero pose here – wide stance, broad shoulders, lifted torso – the kind of pose that requires you to take up lots of space.

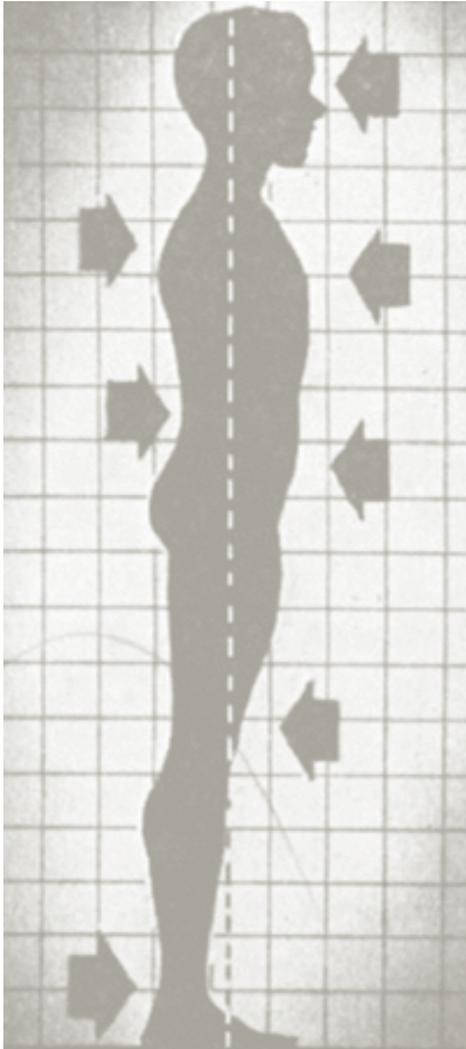
Their findings showed that “high-power posers experienced elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk; low-power posers exhibited the opposite pattern.” This research has significant implications for anyone who gets nervous before they speak or who has to really impress their audience.

Adopting a tall, confident posture doesn't just make you feel better emotionally, it makes you feel more powerful biochemically. How cool is that?! We always knew that posture was important to a public speaker, but it's nice to see quality research that backs it up.

The core elements of a confident, professional posture can be found on the next page. A quick note: we have spared you the wonky explanations of biomechanics such as agonists and assisters. If that kind of thing excites you, then we invite you to explore the National Posture Institute's [website](#).



#1: Posture, continued



For anyone who is motivated to make a positive impression on others, investing the time to work on one or more aspects of good posture will pay big dividends. The following steps from the National Posture Institute should be your guide.

1. **Stand Tall:** Visualize the vertebral column lengthening and growing taller
2. **Hold Chest High:** Visualize opening up the chest and creating a 90° angle of the neck and shoulders by lowering the shoulders and elongating the neck
3. **Retract Scapulae:** Visualize holding a pencil between the shoulder blades and keeping it there
4. **Contract Abdominals:** Visualize drawing the belly button toward the spine and contracting the core muscles

When we coach our presenters, we include a few more tips:

For men: Try to avoid too wide of a stance unless you want to look like a macho athletic coach. We rarely have to advise men not to cross their feet. Try not to pace back and forth with your head down. And keep your hands out of your pockets. We'll talk about hand positions in Chapter 3.

For women: Avoid wearing heels so high that your hips and lower back pitch forward. If you can't maintain the four-point postural alignment then change your shoes. Be sure to keep your chin in a neutral position. Don't cross your feet. Keep them directly under your shoulders for the most confident stance.

For everyone: Never lock your knees. That's what causes brides, grooms, and cadets to topple over!

“*Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning.*”

- Maya Angelou

For the purposes of this e-book, we will tackle the two biggest vocal pitfalls. While there are several others, they all pale in comparison to up-talking and low volume.

The technical term for up-talking is “misplaced upward inflection.” We’re talking about the tendency to make everything sound like a question. Here’s an example: One time? At band camp? My tuba? Fell in the water? And I had to dive in to get it.

Even though a higher percentage of women have this speech pattern, men can suffer from it as well. The only way to get rid of it is to hear it in your own voice. To do that, you need a friend or colleague to make a face or slap the table every time they hear you up-talk. Once you are aware of when and where you throw in a verbal question mark, then you are ready to work on eliminating the bad habit. Here are a few tips for getting rid of the upward inflection when you speak in public:

Word choice. Think about – heck, even write down – what you’re going to say so that you can avoid words that normally trip you up in everyday conversation.

Sentence structure. Now you have to craft sentences that are far from your everyday speaking pattern (which are usually a bunch of very short clauses strung together).

Slow down. Adding in more pauses and slowing your rate of speech will help you become aware of when to drop your intonation down, or, what’s known in the communication biz as “staying in the pocket.”

Tape yourself. Grab a tape recorder. Speak about a very familiar topic, like what you had for breakfast. Then play it back to see if you can hear the up-talk.

Read aloud. Seriously, this is one of the best tips. We guarantee you will not up-talk. You will only raise your inflection when it is important to convey the meaning of the sentence. Try it when you get to page 12.

Vocal variety helps a speaker capture and maintain the attention of the audience. Taylor Mali sums it up beautifully in this [poetry slam](#).



#2: Voice, continued



Pop Quiz!

Q: How long does it take the average listener to lose focus and stop paying attention?

A: Somewhere between two to ten minutes (depending on which researcher you believe most). If the topic is of value to the listener and the speaker is compelling, attention span can last up to 18 minutes. After that, it's all downhill until the speaker says something like, "To summarize..." or "Any questions?"

One way to ensure that you get the full 18 minutes is to use your voice to draw listeners in. This brings us to our next quiz question:

Q: On a scale of 1 to 10, what volume level should the average speaker shoot for in order to be heard in the back of the room, but not overwhelm the first two rows?

A: Seven. Unfortunately, too many speakers fail to raise their volume high enough to maintain the attention of their audience. "But, wait," you say, "I thought I was supposed to sound conversational. How can I do both?" Easy! Put some energy into your delivery and speak like you mean it. You are not on the phone, you are not in a movie theatre. You *are* the show – or as we like to say, you are the gracious host. Welcome people into your home at a seven.

Calling All Low Talkers!

The only way you can be sure you are speaking at a loud-enough volume is to get comfortable with the sensation that you are yelling. If it sounds too loud in your head, chances are it's loud enough for the audience.



If it's a good movie, the sound could go off and the audience would still have a perfectly clear idea of what's going on.



- Alfred Hitchcock

At one of our recent Speaker Boot Camps, we reached the section on gestures. A hand shot up (excellent gesture to indicate a question!) and the participant asked, "Does a speaker *have* to use hand gestures?" Our answer: Only on the days of the week that end in Y.

If you want to connect with and leave a lasting impression on your audience, *gestures* are one leg of a three-legged stool. Without them, the impact of your *words* and your *voice* will be diminished. Great speakers communicate visually as well as verbally.

Here are three surefire techniques to help you use your hands and your body for maximum impact:

Find a comfortable base position for your hands near your belt line. This is the ideal spot for resting hands because it is neither too close to your chest (which can signal fear) nor too close to your crotch (which can signal defensiveness). Try not to grip your hands too tightly. White knuckles are a dead giveaway for nervousness.

Visualize the gesturing "box" which is just outside and above your shoulders and no lower than your hips. Keep your gestures in this box when you are standing up to speak.

Don't bounce your hands. Your goal is to enhance your words, not detract from them. Bouncing hands only worked for Mussolini.

Finally, keep one important thing in mind: your energy has to go somewhere. Whether it's nervous energy or positive energy, if your hands are locked in a "fig leaf" position, the energy will come out in some other way. Using your hands effectively will channel that energy to the right place. Otherwise, it's going to ooze out in your stance and you will rock and sway. Your audience will wonder if you need to use the restroom.



#3: Gestures, continued



Body language experts [Allan and Barbara Pease](#) suggest that non-verbals account for at least 60% of a speaker's impact on an audience. UCLA professor [Albert Mehrabian](#) has found in his research that the visual aspects of a speaker's delivery account for 55%.

The main reason for such high numbers is because of something called [mirroring](#). Researchers have found that the human brain is capable of experiencing the same emotion that is being transmitted by another person. In short, we can empathize.

Did you ever yawn after seeing someone else yawn? That's what we're talking about. If your non-verbals are conveying something different than your words, the audience will feel the dissonance and very likely tune out (if you're lucky) or worse, leave with an overall negative impression (if you're unlucky).

The New York Times ran an interesting piece by Peggy Hackney of NYU's Movement Lab, who examined the body language of President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. Here are the gestures she found to be used most often. To learn about each gesture, [click here](#).

Obama's Gestures



Romney's Gestures



The most important gesture – for any speaker – is a smile.

“Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing.”

- Mother Theresa

“ *Silence, too, can speak out.* ”
- Lech Walesa

The only thing more important than the pace at which you speak is the **silent pause** you insert between clauses, sentences and key messages. All audiences need time to process what they hear and the only way to let them do that is to stop talking. That's right, a speaker must stop talking. Pausing silently is a skill unto itself, but when you add nervous energy, it becomes even more difficult.

The second key element to pacing a presentation is the **rate of speech** – how fast or slow to talk. The answer is simple: 145 words per minute is the fastest a presenter can talk and be sure that the audience can follow along and retain any of what they heard.

The best way improve your pacing

(and all the other secrets in this e-book) is to read aloud. Here's how.

1. Find a passage from your favorite novel, or from your prepared text. Count 145 words. Those are the words you will read out loud. If you want to start now, use the excerpt on the next page taken from our blog, [The Speak Well](#).
2. Use the stopwatch on your smartphone and set it to 1:00.
3. Stand up and find a tall, lifted, professional posture. Take a deep breath. Now press the start button and begin reading. Use your best oratorical voice.
4. When the buzzer sounds, check to see where you are in the delivery. Do you still have text to read? Then try a quicker pace. Did you finish too early? Then you need to slow down and insert longer pauses. If you were way off in either direction, try it again and keep trying until you are just about ending when the timer goes off. A little early or a little late is fine. This is just a guideline.
5. Chances are that you didn't uptalk at all and your vocal delivery had natural intonation and variation. That's the beauty of this exercise.



#4: Pacing, continued



Why Pacing Matters

Humans can think faster than we can speak. Add to that the fact that we now live in a world where email, texting and tweeting are at our fingertips 24/7. Audiences in the 21st century have numerous distractions vying for their attention.

Taken together, it means that people have to make a concerted effort to listen and follow along. If you speak too fast or too slow, you increase the chances of losing your audience. You could have the most compelling information to share, but if you deliver it in a way that makes your audience have to work too hard, they will mentally leave the room.

Reading Aloud Excerpt

While there are many wonderful Fourth of July celebrations across the country, the city of Boston is hard to beat. Neil Diamond singing Sweet Caroline is pretty great. But the hands-down fan favorite is the Boston Pops rendition of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture – with its cannons and bells and crescendos – it gets your heart pumping and your synapses firing. By the end of the 17-minute piece, your blood is singing in your veins.

Even without a conductor, synchronized fireworks, and perfect acoustics, we can all liven up our presentations no matter what the topic. First, look people in the eye and smile before you begin speaking. It's amazing how many speakers start with their head down. Then say something interesting to grab their attention – a compelling statistic, a question, or personal disclosure. You will now see all faces looking up at you with curiosity and interest. (145 words)

Want to learn more about any of these secrets?

Visit our website
www.speakwellpartners.com

“ *Eye contact is a psychological handshake. It makes the members of the audience feel engaged, as if you were having a conversation with each of them.* ”

- Gene Zelazny

Imagine being stuck in a meeting from hell. Boring agenda. Listless participants. Too many tangents. If that weren't enough, the meeting leader launches into the first agenda item without letting people introduce themselves. Someone interrupts and asks if it's not too late do a round of introductions. Everyone agrees, and it turns out that these, too, are mind-numbingly dull.

But then, something interesting happens. One participant decides to share a personal anecdote and informs the group that he just returned home from his honeymoon. At that point a few heads turn his way. The meeting leader makes an off-hand comment about vows of marriage being a really big step in a person's life, to which the guy replies, "True, but when you strike oil, you stop drilling."

Everyone in the room perks up and focuses on the newlywed and what they see is a big, sappy smile on his face. He can hardly contain himself. It's not too much of a leap to assume that the women started smiling back at him because it is refreshing to hear a guy publicly express loving thoughts about his wife, even if he did compare her to an oil gusher. The men in the room smiled, too – possibly because they were conjuring up images of, well, a great honeymoon.

From that moment on, the mood in the room changes for the better. Now there is energy and bonding and whoever else is left to introduce themselves steps up their game.

This is another example of mirroring, which we discussed in Chapter 3. In scientific terms, the newlywed ignited the "mirror neurons" in the brains of his listeners. As neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti describes it, "We are exquisitely social creatures. Our survival depends on understanding the actions, intentions and emotions of others." (You can read more about this concept [here](#)).

Being authentic and sharing genuine emotion can help make any speaker more engaging. We will look at how effective speakers do this on the next page.

#5: Connection, continued



The Connected Speaker's Checklist

When we work with clients to help them prepare for an upcoming presentation, we always use a checklist to be sure that all elements of a memorable presentation are incorporated into the practice rounds.

In the first round of practice we look for evidence that the presenter has aligned his or her remarks with the needs of the audience. In the second round we look for an organized structure and effective word choices. And in the third round we focus on the non-verbal aspects of audience engagement. Here is our list.

1. Maintains eye contact _____
2. Gestures enhance words _____
3. Minimal use of notes _____
4. No distracting mannerisms _____
5. Feet and torso facing audience _____
6. Smiling/engaging facial expressions _____
7. Projects confidence, attentiveness _____
8. Conveys genuine interest in audience _____



Self-Assessment Tool

How do you rate your skills?



To get the most use out of this e-book, it's best to take a few minutes and reflect on your past performance, your current needs, and your future goals. The assessment below is designed to focus your attention on any strengths you have as a speaker, but may have taken for granted. It is also designed to help you make decisions about where you want to develop your skills to enhance your success. As executive coaches, we know how effective this activity can be, so we encourage you to stay on this page for a little while. Or better yet, bring it with you when you go to your favorite coffee shop and hang out for a while.

Posture

My posture is confident and professional and I move without distracting my audience.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Vocal Qualities

I use vocal inflection and vary my tone of voice to keep the attention of my audience. There are no misplaced vocal inflections.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Gestures

I use natural and relevant gestures that enhance my words and underscore my key points.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Pacing

I maintain a rate of speech that is easy to follow and I am comfortable pausing silently when appropriate.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Eye Contact

I make a genuine connection with my audience by making 2 to 3-second eye contact with audience members. I maintain a good balance of looking left, right, and center.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Overall Impression

I come across as professional and confident with a clear command of the subject matter. The overall impression of my verbal and non-verbal characteristics helps me achieve my objectives.

Needs work _____ Acceptable _____ Good _____ Outstanding _____

Now What?



Why not take your skills to the next level?

- Call us to schedule a [coaching](#) engagement
- Follow our [blog](#) for many more tips and inspiration
- Attend a Speaker [Boot Camp](#)
- Schedule a [workshop](#) for your company

“This workshop offered so many ways to improve my presentation skills and to understand the role I play in connecting with an audience.”

- L. Jordan, Caliper Life Sciences

Don't gamble
with your next big
presentation.
Call us today!