

Voice Coaching for Fitness Leaders

By Jill Cressy (BPHE, MEd)



Why is Voice Important?

As a fitness leader, voice communicates our identity. It reveals our emotions, our mood swings, our tensions, and our overall energy patterns. Through our voice, we broadcast to the outside world how we feel about our self, how we feel about our work, and how we feel about our life. In this way, voice is a symbol of who we are at the core. It is an intricate, vital part of our personality and intimately connected to our self-image.

Our voice influences the impression people have of us. When we use our voice effectively, it can be an asset and draw people to us. When used ineffectively, it can be a liability and push people away from us. When we have a clear, effective voice, people tend to trust us and listen to what we say. Then it's easier to reach our professional goals (e.g., enjoy a successful interview and be hired for a job, increase participants number in our classes, or simply persuade colleagues to support our ideas). Strong speaking skills = greater respect, more influence, and increased persuasive power. A well-developed voice communicates confidence, credibility and professionalism.



In addition to broadcasting our identity and influencing the impression others have of us, voice is important for basic health reasons. As fitness leaders, we want to be able to count on our voice and know it will work for us throughout the entire class. We want vocal strength, stamina and endurance each time we need to be 'on' with participants, clients, and members. Just as we warm-up our body and work the muscles in our legs, arms, and core during a fitness class, we can also work our 'voice muscles' so they become strong and flexible. The set of exercises listed at the end of this article is a leadership tool you can use before teaching class, before important meetings, before interviews, and before presentations to make sure your voice has staying power.

To speak clearly, we need to move our mouth around. With the mask restrictions during COVID-19 and fatigue from the ongoing pandemic, many people found themselves mumbling. Some tried to fix the problem by speaking louder. However, voice projection isn't necessarily the solution. Yes, we were asked to socially distance and wear masks, but that didn't actually require us to raise our voice while speaking. Sometimes the more effective skill is to speak more clearly, adjust our voice tone and speaking rate, and take time to pause at appropriate times. Have you ever attended a class where you felt the instructor was shouting from start to end, or talked to a colleague at work who was speaking so loud and fast, you felt the need to step back? There's a difference between

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sounding excited and anxious. There's also a difference between sounding enthusiastic and frantic. To create a positive fitness environment, we want to motivate, not intimidate.

Most fitness leadership programs discuss voice projection, body language and voice tone; however, there are other important speech components to understand in order to have the maximum benefits from your voice. Some of the basics include speaking rhythm, vocal placement, inflection, pitch, speaking rate, and pausing. Vocal health is also definitely important to communicate energy!

Speaking Rhythm:

An overly repetitive speaking rhythm can cause people to tune out and lose interest in what you are saying. Be able to alter your speaking rhythm at will. Staccato voice is short bursts of speech (that sound choppy) used to emphasize a point, sound commanding, or business oriented. Legato voice is smooth, flowing delivery used to communicate calm, soothing qualities and to sound relaxed. Too much staccato can come across as sounding harsh. Too much legato can sound wimpy. Mix up your staccato and legato.

Vocal Placement:

Directing your voice from your chest will make your voice sound more authoritative and commanding. Directing your voice above the neck (particularly from the eyes) will make your voice sound light, innocent, soft and tender.

Inflection and Pitch

Inflection is the amount of fluctuation between your highest and lowest pitch. Inflection patterns impact how others perceive us. Habitual upward inflection is ending most of your sentences as if asking a question. This can come across as revealing insecurities about making a firm statement. Habitual downward inflection is ending most of your sentences on a downward note. This can reflect sadness or a sense of feeling down. Monotone is a flat voice that is repetitive, lacking expression, and dull. This can be boring for the listener and can suggest suppressed emotions.

Staying at the same pitch can also have a negative impact. Low pitch without fluctuation to medium or high pitch can sound deep and cold. This can suggest the need to sound authoritative.



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It can be repetitive and boring for the listener to keep hearing the low pitch. High pitch without fluctuation to medium or low pitch can come across as sounding young and reflect insecurities. The person who hangs out in the high pitch may be less likely to be perceived as a professional. Also, it can become annoying for the listener. Variety of pitch is key. Use a healthy amount of inflection (enough variety to engage your listeners), yet understand that too much inflection also has consequences. Too much variation in pitch can come across as emotional instability (sounds too dramatic).

Speaking Rate and Breathing:

The proper place to breathe is at the end of a thought, even if it comes in the middle of a sentence. In fitness classes, this principle can be adapted to breathing in between cues. Before introducing a new move or prior to the next choreographed section, allow sufficient time to pause and breathe properly. If you exhale too much air before you speak, you'll be forced to pause repeatedly in order to catch your breath. Relaxed, natural breathing is the key factor to speak smoothly. Think of expanding your waist line rather than your chest for proper breathing. If you want to increase your rate of speech, compress the space between your words (rather than saying the words faster) and eliminate unnecessary pauses.

Non-Words

Non-words are meaningless fillers that speckle our speech. Examples include um, ah, well, anyway, you know? Sort of, and for Canadians...the infamous 'A'? These non-words are also called 'verbal viruses'. They drain our impact, distract from our message and annoy the listener. Non-words also make us appear unsure, hesitant, and even incompetent.



To prevent non-words, become conscious of the words you use. When you sense a non-word about to come on, pause instead, allow a breath, and then continue speaking. Become comfortable with a pause. Feel the discomfort when you catch yourself saying a non-word. Ask a friend to point out when you say um and other non-words. Record yourself on video and when you watch it notice any non-words. Listen to your voice messages on the phone; re-record if you hear a non-word. Also, understand the benefits of a pause. A pause gives the listener time to reflect. It draws in the audience, adds drama and impact, showing confidence and poise. You can pause up to 4 seconds right in the middle of a sentence and it will still seem natural to your listener. In fitness classes, you can pause longer in between cues and make use of non-verbal cues.

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Vocal Health:

To keep your voice fit and healthy, allow deep abdominal breathing and maintain proper posture. Pause at the end of a thought and allow the breath to be replaced. Avoid speaking beyond natural breath cycle (avoid pushing the voice out and squeezing out additional thoughts without sufficient breath). Maintain proper humidity in your home and work environment. Drink plenty of water, especially when you are using your voice. Allow periods of vocal rest throughout the day and consciously relax your jaw. Be aware of initial signs of vocal fatigue (dry throat, throat tension/pain, weak vocal projection, hoarse voice). Rest your voice when it feels strained, especially if you have a cold. Avoid clearing your throat or coughing habitually. Avoid prolonged yelling, whispering, cheering or screaming. Use your voice as little as possible in cars, planes, and other noisy environments. Avoid excessive pollution, cigarette smoke or chemical fumes. Stay away from excessive caffeine, chocolate, milk products, alcohol or tobacco. Eat healthy foods that provide proper nutrition and support your immune system. When speaking to a large number of participants, request the use of a microphone. Massage your facial muscles every so often, especially the TMJ (temporomandibular) area. Set an intention before you go to sleep at night to relax your jaw. Massage your neck, shoulders, upper back, chest, and facial muscles to release unnecessary tension and improve your voice quality.



The Jaw, Tongue & Larynx:

The jaw is a common place to hold tension. The temporomandibular joints beside your ears are the most complex joint in the body (56 moving parts). Discomfort in this area can include TMJ syndrome. Massage the soft tissue in this area each day and set an intention before you go to sleep to keep your jaw relaxed (this helps prevent jaw clenching at night). The tongue is the strongest muscle per diameter in the body. It is another common place to hold tension. Sticking out your tongue once a day helps release some of this tension. The larynx is the smallest and most complex muscle in the body. It is the only muscle that functions solely through the movement of air. The larynx is also called the 'voice box.'

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Whispering and Throat Clearing:

Whispering is performed by a tiny muscle called the cryothyrod that connects to the lower rear part of the larynx. This is a weaker part of the vocal mechanism and it tires out quickly. If your throat is sore, it is a mistake to think that you are saving your voice by whispering. You are actually hurting your voice more by whispering. Rest your voice and drink water (at room temperature). Throat clearing causes the vocal folds to rub together without air. This is one of the worst things you can do for the larynx. Instead, allow saliva to build up and swallow (or gently cough to loosen mucous, and/or gargle with mouthwash softly and quietly).

Tips to Communicate Energy:

Become aware of your posture, lengthen your spine, relax your shoulders, lengthen the back of your neck, open your chest, and allow a deep and loving breath. Use a variety of hand gestures (from soft and gentle to intense). Use a variety of facial expressions (e.g., smile, raise eye brows, widen eyes, or wink). If you feel tired and your voice starts to drag, move your body (e.g., shift your hip) and adjust one or more of your vocal patterns (e.g., rhythm, placement, pitch/inflection) and your voice will sound more expressive. To increase resonance, place your voice in the facial mask (the triangular area that stretches between your two sinuses and your mouth). Let your voice have the right to exist. Think of your voice taking up space. Sense your core. Think of this area as being your 'power center'. Feel grounded from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head. Feel energy moving freely throughout your whole body. Connect to your heart and be grateful for the gift of voice! 😊



Voice Coaching - Exercises

BREATHING

Relaxing & Centering Breath to Foster Abdominal Breathing

Yawn-Sigh:

- Inhale slowly on a yawn, feel the air in the back of your throat, exhale.
- Repeat the inhaled yawn and vocalize (sigh) as you exhale

Centering Breath:

- Inhale slowly, exhale all breath comfortably on 'ff'
- Inhale slowly, exhale all breath comfortably on 'sss'

Breath Prolongation (aids vocal strength):

- Inhale slowly, exhale on 'sss'
- Exhale ½ breath on 'sss', rest of breath on 'huh'

COORDINATING BREATH & SOUND

- Inhale slowly, exhale on 'huh' and gently tap your chest
- Exhale ½ breath on 'zzz' (feel the vibration on your teeth & tongue), rest on 'huh'

Expanding Vocal Range (aids pitch variation)

Gliding Trills:

- Start at a comfortable pitch and gently glide up in pitch
- Glide back down to your normal speaking range

Stepping:

- Starting at a comfortable pitch, exhale on an easy 'huh'
- Step up progressively on each subsequently breath, and then step down.

Resonance: (aids tonal quality)

Mask: focus sound vibrations in nasal passages, cheek bones, lips

- 'huuummm' – feel the vibrations on the lips, move the mouth around
- 'hummmm' - step up and down in pitch
- 'huuummeee' – wiggle nose up and down
- 'huuummeee' – massage sinuses

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Chest:

- Tilt head slightly back, jaw open. Exhale a warm 'haaa'. Tap chest.
- 'hummmaah'. Step down in pitch. Tap chest.

Head: focus sound vibrations in bones of the skull

- 'heee'. Tilt head forward. Wiggle nose up & down.
- 'heee' Step up in pitch, massaging sinuses.
- 'khee'. Call out at comfortable high pitch, glide down to normal speaking pitch

Feeling Sensations on Hard Palate (move sound forward in mouth for better resonance)

- Exaggerate the 'ee' in 'beautiful' (the sound of 'Beeeeutiful')
- Intone Yeee Yeee Yeee Yeee, AyyyAyyyAyyyAyyy

Intoning (Increases resonance & promotes proper placement of sound on hard palate)

- Intone alphabet. Feel the sound move from deep in the abdomen, up through the torso, through an open throat, out the front of your mouth and across the room in a direct, unobstructed air stream
- Explore the richness of the sound vibrations in the skull, face, chest, and back

ARTICULATION PREPARATION:

- Massage the face, scalp, back of head, neck, jaw muscle
- Open face wide, stick out tongue, lift eyebrows, relax
- Screw face up into tight ball, relax face
- Pucker and smile, alternate cheek lifts
- Chew imaginary piece of gum
- Intone "Oo-Aw" (feel jaw close on Oo, open on Aw)
- Intone "Oo-Ee" (exaggerate lips forward on Oo and spread wide open on Ee)

ARTICULATION EXERCISES:

Lips:

- Me me mee, may may may, maw maw maw
- Be be be, bay bay bay, baw baw baw
- Pee pee pee, pay pay pay, paw paw paw
- Maw maw mee, ma ma may, maw maw maw/maw/maw
- Baw baw bee, baw baw bay, baw baw baw/baw/baw
- Paw paw pee, paw pay pay, pay paw paw/paw/paw

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Exaggerate lip movements:

- Oi (feel the O before it moves to i)
- Ow (feel the Ah before it moves to w)
- Moi, Mow / Poi, Pow / Boi, Bow

Tip of Tongue:

- La, la, la/la/la; Ta, ta, ta/ta/ta; Da, da, da/da/da; Na, na, na/na/na
- La la le, la la lay, la la la/la/la; Ta ta tee, ta ta tay, ta ta ta/ta/ta
- Da da dee, da da day, da da da/da/da; Na na nee, na na nay, na na na/na/na

Back of Tongue: Drop jaw open, only use tongue and soft palate

- Gah, kah, ngah
- Gah gah gee, gah gah gay, gah gah gah/gah/gah
- Kah kah kee, ka ka kay, kah kah kah/kah/kah
- Ngah ngah ngee, ngah ngah ngay, ngah ngah ngah/ngah/ngah

MUSCULAR FLEXIBILITY (Aids speaking with clarity)

Both lips:

- Many merry moments make Madge mischievous

Tongue tip and alveolar ridge:

- Round and round the rugged rock the ragged rascal ran

Lower lip and upper teeth:

- The very vibrant vixen vexed Victor viciously

Tongue blade and front of hard palate:

- Joan joyously joined jaunty John in jingling jigs

Tongue tip and upper teeth:

- Whistle for the thistle sifter

Back of tongue and soft palate:

- Gabby gardeners gather together to gossip in garrulous groups

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DICTION

Diction is the degree of clarity and distinctness in speech. The following sentences have been designed to work many of the vowel and consonant sounds in the English language:

- Green tea ice cream is a treat to eat
- Go with the flow to stay in the know
- Juice makes the sauce more succulent
- Ask her if she wants to take on the task
- The breeze made her sneeze as she walked through the trees
- The odd opera singer had a four-octave range
- The anchor signed off on the nightly news
- Throughout the night he thought things through

Jill Cressy (BPHE, MEd) is a Health & Fitness Programs Supervisor with the YMCA of Greater Toronto. She has extensive leadership experience overseeing fitness, sport and recreation programs. Jill has presented for a variety of organizations, facilitated interactive workshops, delivered virtual coaching and collaborated with partners to support community engagement and well-being. She has a Bachelor of Physical and Health Education and Master of Education from the University of Toronto. Jill completed her MEd at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education within the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, and her final elective in Health Communications at the Graduate Department of Exercise Sciences in partnership with the Dalla Lana School of Public Health. In addition, she completed the U of T Rose Patten Mentorship Program and a variety of fitness and mindfulness certifications. As the Assistant Manager of Fitness and Instruction at the U of T Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, Jill provided leadership to fitness, dance, sport, movement, yoga and mindfulness programs, and managed a large number of staff including recruiting, hiring, training, mentoring, coaching, supervising and scheduling. In her Community Health Coordinator role, she also extended the reach and delivery of health and wellness programs. Jill received various U of T awards recognizing outstanding contributions to the university and its strategic objectives including the Stepping Up Award and three Excellence through Innovation Awards.

