

*Your  
Million-Dollar  
Voice!*

*The Voice You Were Born With Isn't The Voice You're Stuck With*

*By Ruth Sherman*

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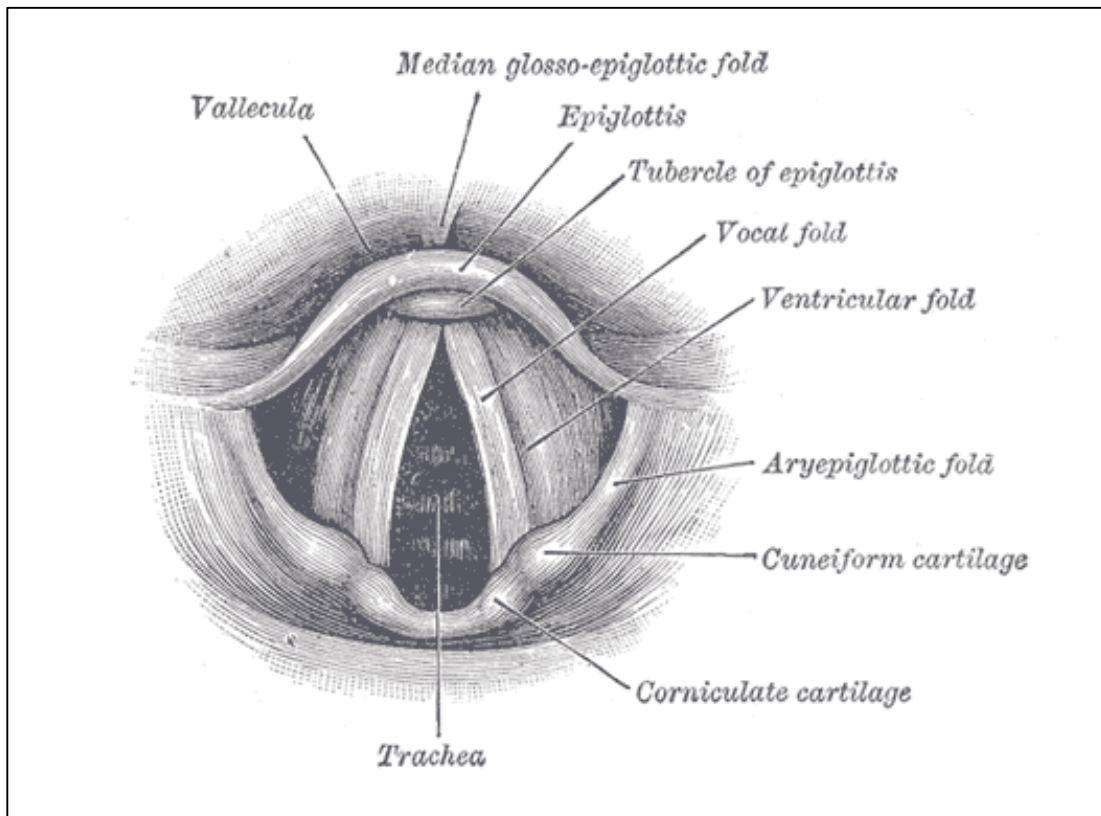
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## **YOUR MILLION-DOLLAR VOICE**

The mechanism that produces the voice is known as the vocal cords or vocal folds. These are two tiny strands of specialized muscle tissue that are located in the larynx or voice box and situated at the top of the trachea or windpipe (see illustration on following page). You can find them by taking your fingers and placing them on your throat just below your adam's apple. Now make a vocal sound. You should feel a strong vibration.

These two strands of tissue have a space between them. When you are not speaking, the strands are open (“abducted” as in illustration) and you breathe without any friction. When you speak, the strands close (“adduct”), air is forced through them and causes them to vibrate. If you push air through forcefully, your voice will get louder. If you push the air through more gently, the voice will become softer. If you whisper, the vocal cords are in action, but not vibrating in the same way as when vocal sound is made. Frequency of vibration determines pitch. A higher frequency produces a higher pitch and a lower frequency, a lower pitch.

In this paper, I’m going to cover three aspects of the **Speaking Voice**: Tone, Breath and Rhythm.



*Illustration of Vocal Mechanism*

## **MUST DO: BUY A RECORDER, PRESS RECORD, SPEAK, PLAY IT BACK**

You cannot improve your voice unless you can hear yourself as other people hear you and for that, you need a recorder of some type. I mention it at the outset because of how critically important it is. Listening to your voice played back can be difficult, even painful. This is because we are so accustomed to hearing our voices from the inside instead of from the outside. Then, when we finally hear ourselves the way others hear us, we are shocked at the sound. Even people with supposedly good voices have this reaction. Therefore, best to get used to the sound of your voice sooner than later.

**Recommendation:** Buy a small digital recorder that you can connect to your computer's USB port and transfer files. Olympus makes some very good, inexpensive recorders as do other well-known manufacturers.

## **TONE**

Each voice is unique which makes it an ideal tool for differentiating speakers and styles. The tone of any given voice is determined by a combination of factors pertaining to nature and nurture. The nature part includes the physical size of the person, the size of the vocal cords themselves, the size and shapes of the resonating chambers including all the organs and features of the mouth and throat, head and sinus cavities, chest, and, of course, gender. Nurture refers to the process by which we learn speech by listening to parents, our social background and geographic or regional influences. No combination of these things is the same any other.

## **VOCAL VARIETY**

**Vocal variety** refers to the way we use pitch to modulate the voice to express emotion and give our words meaning. For example, you can choose a simple, one-syllable word and give it an entirely different meaning through vocal variety. Try the simple, single-worded question, "What?" Now say it expressing three different meanings:

- **Surprise or astonishment**
- **Anger or irritation**
- **Distractedness or disinterest**

Or, try this simple sentence emphasizing a different word each time:

- **I'M** very happy to meet you.
- I'm **VERY** happy to meet you
- I'm very **HAPPY** to meet you
- I'm very happy to **MEET** you.
- I'm very happy to meet **YOU**.

Isn't it amazing how the meaning changes each time?

**Vocal Variety** is fueled and dictated by how we *feel* and enables us to *connect* with our audience. It is an essential element we are blessed with to help us communicate.

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Unfortunately, we have been told again and again that there is no place for emotion at work. Instead, however, of simple avoiding the extremes of emotion, we have interpreted this directive to mean no *emotional displays of any kind* and many people have internalized this to the extent where the voice is included. The result? *The corporate monotone*. The corporate monotone is a flatness of tone that is designed to sound unemotional supposed to communicate calm, control, steadfastness and neutrality. Taken to the extreme, though, it prevents workers from exhibiting their passion for their work. One has only to think about what that means for the sales department.

Therefore, trainers (who are, really, in sales of a certain type) must remain mindful that a flat, monotonous voice will create a barrier to connection and will not allow them to influence and persuade trainees as ably as they would if they used their vocal variety to greatest advantage.

One problem that exists for people who are habitual users of the corporate monotone is that increasing the **vocal variety** initially feels odd and even phony or theatrical. This is to be expected as modifying ingrained behaviors is always difficult. There are two items to think about:

- **Exaggeration**
- **Disparity**

Trainers new to the idea of using their voices more expressively will have to exaggerate. At the same time, because of the newness of the feeling associated with exhibiting more **vocal variety**, there will be a disparity of perception; the trainer/speaker will feel as if he or she is going too far and over-the-top while the audience or listener is likely to think the trainer's voice is coming out just right, that is, not too little variety and not too much. This disparity recedes with practice.

The corporate monotone is the *opposite* of vocal variety.

Material also matters. If a trainer is delivering training that he or she is not passionate about or can at least drum up some positive feelings for, or if that trainer is doing a program repeatedly, he or she might need to find another training program to deliver or freshen up the existing material.

Remember, when you walk into that training room, it is *always* opening night.

## **RESONANCE**

**Resonance**, as it refers to the voice, is often characterized by words such as rich, round, booming or ringing. There are many speakers we can point to whose voices we would say contain a great deal of resonance. Think of James Earl Jones and Diane Sawyer as good examples

If we were to put our ear to someone's chest and ask them to phonate (make vocal sound), we would hear and feel the sound and its accompanying vibrations. Other places that function as resonating chambers are the sinus cavities and throat and mouth.

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**Exercise:** Try the following to identify and increase resonance:

1. Hum with your lips closed (“hmmmmmmmmmm...”) and put two fingers on your lips, then move to the outside of a nostril, then down to your adam’s apple. You should feel the buzz of vibration.
2. Now, open your mouth and take a breath as if you are gasping in surprise. Do this two or three times and on one exhalation, say “ahhhhhhhhh.” If you look into a mirror as you’re doing this, you will see the soft palate at the upper back of your mouth rise and increase the size of the opening to your throat. This openness creates a larger resonating chamber.
3. Breathe as in #2 and put your fingers to your adam’s apple and your chest. The resonance has now been shifted away from your sinus area and lies primarily in the throat and chest.
4. Breathe as in #2, and this time, say “Hi,” extending the vowel for a few seconds and feeling where the buzzes occur. Experiment with a range of pitches from high to low and see what feels most resonant.
5. Try words with different vowel sounds such as *we*, *do*, *bay* and *row*. Note that certain vowel sounds lend themselves more to resonance than others.

As you speak, think about where the sound resonates. This is known as vocal placement. Proper vocal placement should always have you speaking with a voice that is at its **optimum pitch level** or **OPL**.

Be particularly careful about nasality, which is a habit that many people have developed. Use the above exercises to shift some of the resonance from the nose to the mouth, chest and core. Your entire body should be involved.

Much of the time, we speak at our **habitual pitch level (HPL)** and that may be too high (Michael Jackson) or too low (Henry Kissinger). Either one places unnecessary strain on the voice. Generally, women and young people of both genders have an HPL that is too high. Men often strive for what they consider to be “deeper” voices but which, in actuality, are HPLs that are too low.

A too low pitch level can result in what is known as “vocal fry,” a sound that resembles a low, rat-a-tat-tat. I’ve often described it as the sound made by a Geiger counter when radiation is detected. Vocal fry is gender neutral and often occurs at the ends of sentences and phrases when the pitch is dropped too low. Instead of allowing this to happen, try to keep the voice above the pitch level where it descends into vocal fry.

Aim for a habitual pitch level that is comfortable. For some people that may mean lowering the pitch and for others, raising it. Record yourself and – importantly – LISTEN!

## **BREATH CONTROL FOR VOCAL POWER AND ENERGY**

People are often mystified by the idea of breath control or support as a function of a good speaking voice. So let’s take some of the mystery out of it. We breathe to live, of course, and as such, we don’t have to think about it. When we are speaking, however, in order to create and maintain a level of vocal power and energy so that we can stir excitement in our programs, we have to think about how we utilize our breath. We also control volume and projection through breath.

**Exercise** Try the following:

1. First, picture how you breathe after strenuous exercise. You chest heaves and you pant rapidly.

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2. Bring your hands to the level of the bottom of your rib cage. Position them so they are directly one over the other, palms facing, elbows out to the sides.
3. Hook your fingers (minus the thumbs) together and pull but do not let go. You should feel the pull in your shoulders, upper arms and upper chest wall.
4. As you pull, take two or three deep breaths, very slowly. Take a few more and look down. You should see your abdomen expanding and contracting. Concentrate on keeping your shoulders steady. Do not allow them to rise with each breath.
5. Now, take a deep breath and exhale, this time saying "ah...." Stay on the "ah" for 5 seconds. Then repeat and hold it for 10 seconds, then for 15. Finally, breathe and say "ah" for as long as you can. You should feel a strong contraction in your abdomen as you run out of breath. Okay, relax your body and stretch out.
6. Re-connect your hands and pull. Now, beginning at a middle pitch, take a deep, abdominal breath and say, "one," moving lower in pitch over about 3 seconds until your voice is very low. It should be a strong vocal sound. Do the same with two, three, four and five. Breathe before each one.
7. This time, count from one to five, without taking breaths, starting on a mid-level pitch with each number and heading lower, only move more quickly so that you are on each number for about 1½ seconds.
8. Next, say the word "yum." Now, beginning at a very high pitch (falsetto), say "Yum, yum, yum, yum, " etc. until you find yourself getting down very low. The "Y" and "M" in this word help to assure good voice placement. This means resonance and fullness without vocal strain. Do this a few times. (It is especially effective after a good meal.) In addition, around midway down the pitch ladder, you should find your OPL, optimum pitch level.

Your voice should be quite warmed-up by now and you should have an idea of what it takes to project and intensify it.

## **RHYTHM**

Rhythm refers to the percussive aspects of speech such as diction (pronunciation, articulation, enunciation), accents and dialects, rate, pace, pauses and silences. Rhythm dictates comprehensibility.

## **DICTION**

Diction is a word that has come to have more than one meaning. The original meaning, and one that still exists is the choice and use of words. These days, however, we associate the word with clarity and precision of pronunciation.

Being clear and precise in pronunciation is necessary to listener understanding. Some speakers simply have poor diction habits. Diction can be improved by paying attention to words endings such as "t," "d," "s," "z," "j," and "k."

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**Exercise:** Try the following to get your mouth, lips and tongue working toward crisp, precise diction:

1. Slowly say the words *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*. Make sure you really pronounce your *t* and *k*. There should be a strong puff of air expelled with each sound so if a lit candle was held an inch or two away from your mouth, it would flicker or go out. Repeat a few times.
2. Now, say the words *ticketa-tocketa, ticketa-tocketa, ticketa-tocketa*. **MAKE SURE YOU DO NOT SUBSTITUTE A D SOUND FOR THE SECOND T.** The pronunciation of these words should make active use of the tongue and teeth and sound very crisp. Repeat a few times. As you practice, see if you can speed it up.

The preceding exercises should help you feel the effort that goes into precise, crisp diction.

## **ACCENTS AND DIALECTS**

Accents and Dialects refer to geographical influences on speech. For the purposes of definition, an accent is the way a person speaks a language when that person is not a native speaker of that language. So if I am a native, American English speaker and I go to France and speak French, I would speak it with an American accent. A dialect is a variation of the way a particular language is spoken based on regional and social influences. In English, there is the American dialect, the British dialect, the Canadian dialect, the West Indian (Caribbean) dialect, etc. In addition, there are many dialects within dialects, witness the Texas “drawl” or the “lockjaw” often associated with the wealthy enclaves of the Northeast not to mention the so-called “Cockney” dialect in the U.K.

As long as a speaker is easy to understand, accents and dialects pose no problems. In fact, properly used, the accent or dialect can serve as a significant differentiator.

## **RATE AND PACE**

One way to improve diction is to slow your rate of speech. This basic technique often seems to work miracles, because it allows the tongue and facial muscles to take more time and thus gain more precision.

But slowing down may be more difficult than you expect, especially if you live and work in one of the faster-talking regions of the world. In the Northeastern cities, for example, the rate of speech is much faster than in the South, Southwest and Midwest. In addition, there is some research that has shown a faster rate of speech influences perceptions of competence and intelligence more positively.

The best way to know if you’re speaking too fast is to recall whether you’re asked to slow down or to repeat yourself on a regular basis. If so, than some deliberate slowing of your rate may be in order.

There is another great benefit to moderating your rate of speech and that is it gives you time to think, helping you to gain fluency not only in the way you string words together but the way you string thoughts together, too.

Pace has to do with how you use pauses and silences in your speech. Too often, we are afraid to be quiet for a few seconds, afraid we’ll lose our listeners. So we fill our speech with non-fluencies such as “uh” and “um” and words/phrases such as “like,” “y’know,” “ok?,” and “y’know what I mean?” Instead of using these fillers, pause, think then speak.



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As you move between different audiences in, perhaps, different regions of the country or world, you may have to adapt your rate and pace accordingly. The idea is to adapt just enough to enhance connectibility.

Now, go and dig up your collection of Shakespeare and choose a monologue. A couple of the most famous ones are included in this handout. Use what you've just learned and apply it. Another very useful exercise with material right at your fingertips is to read aloud from the newspaper. Pretend you are a newscaster and *ham it up!*

Finally, practice with your voice mail message. Most voice mail messages sound very mundane and as if they've been read from the same script (which they have!). Jot down a few notes and run it a few times before you settle on one you like. This forces you to listen to yourself and also forces you to improve on the spot.

## **AVOIDING VOCAL DAMAGE**

Professional voice users know that vocal damage can occur. It usually begins quite subtly and if not addressed early, can cause lasting problems. If your voice does not feel right and it does not get better within 2 or 3 weeks, it's time to get it looked at by an M.D.

Damage can occur for several reasons, chief among them is vocal abuse. This includes shouting, yelling or screaming for extended periods of time and speaking extensively without getting adequate voice rest. As a trainer, it's important to keep your voice in top form and to do so, follow the rules below:

1. Use a microphone whenever possible. Mics allow you to speak at a moderate volume and limit vocal strain and fatigue.
2. Drink plenty of liquids like water and herbal tea.
3. Avoid alcohol and caffeine; both dry out the throat.
4. Do not use your voice if you have laryngitis caused by a cold virus. Although your voice will eventually heal, it will take longer.
5. If you suspect there is something wrong with your voice, get it checked out.
6. If a doctor recommends surgery for hoarseness, nodes or polyps (that are not life-threatening), get a second opinion. Most vocal damage will heal completely with voice therapy instead of surgery which can cause irreversible voice damage



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## DICTION EXERCISES

Drill words that end in *sks*, *sts* and *ths*. (asks, NOT ask; masts, NOT mass; fifths, NOT fifs). Some practice words are below:

asks casks masks tasks basks desks risks asterisks disks frisks whisks obelisks kiosks mosques husks cornhusks mollusks	casts lasts blasts pasts fasts masts wastes pastes rests quests guests tests mists assists lists fists artists resists	fourths fifths sixths sevenths eighths ninths tenths hundredths thousandths months cloths moths behemoths truths teethes smoothes seethes breathes
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Drill words ending in *ct*. Produc**T**, NOT product, ejec**T**, NOT eject:

product conduct contact fact act pact contract counteract abstract distract enact exact tract transact compact abduct connect	construct duct eject respect expect prospect inject interject dialect insect perfect reflect project reject collect object direct	deduct addict afflict convict conflict district restrict derelict verdict predict effect erect subject architect aspect defect correct
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One of the best ways to add crispness and precision to your diction is to focus on word endings, an especially effective technique for words that end in a voiced consonant. For example, *bit* is pronounced with the unvoiced *t*. But for its relative, *bid*, the *d* is voiced. Therefore, it needs a tiny, extra, unstressed addition at the end of the word so it sounds like this: *bid-uh*.

mood = <i>mood-uh</i> code = <i>code-uh</i> seed = <i>seed-uh</i> bed = <i>bed-uh</i> cab = <i>cab-uh</i> job = <i>job-uh</i>	crime = <i>crime-uh</i> dime = <i>dime-uh</i> sign = <i>sign-uh</i> fine = <i>fine-uh</i> wave = <i>wave-uh</i> gave = <i>gave-uh</i>	leg = <i>leg-uh</i> rug = <i>rug-uh</i> brag = <i>brag-uh</i> big = <i>big-uh</i> bathe – <i>bathe-uh</i> breathe = <i>breathe-uh</i>	gaze = <i>gaze-uh</i> maze = <i>maze-uh</i> raise – <i>raise-uh</i> plays – <i>plays-uh</i> age = <i>age-uh</i> cage = <i>cage-uh</i>
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Drill words ending in *t*. Tha**T**, NOT Tha (glottal stop), ba**T**, NOT ba (glottal stop):

at bat brat cat chat fat flat gnat hat mat pat rat sat slat splat vat spat begat combat	bit chit fit flit get grit hit it kit knit lit mitt pit quit skit slit spit split wit acquit admit befit commit transmit unfit	bite blight bright cite fight flight fright height kite, knight might plight quite right sight spite sprite tight white write
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## SHAKESPEARE MONOLOGUES

### From Julius Ceasar:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;  
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him;  
The evil that men do lives after them,  
The good is oft interred with their bones,  
So let it be with Caesar ...  
The noble Brutus Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:  
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,  
And grievously hath Caesar answered it ...  
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest,  
(For Brutus is an honourable man; So are they all; all honourable men) Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral ...  
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:  
But Brutus says he was ambitious; And Brutus is an honourable man....  
He hath brought many captives home to Rome,  
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:  
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?  
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:  
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:  
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;  
And Brutus is an honourable man.  
You all did see that on the Lupercal I thrice presented him a kingly crown, Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?  
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious; And, sure, he is an honourable man.  
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,  
But here I am to speak what I do know.  
You all did love him once, not without cause:  
What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?  
O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,  
And men have lost their reason.... Bear with me;  
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,  
And I must pause till it come back to me.

### From Henry V:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends,  
once more;  
Or close the wall up with our English dead.  
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man  
As modest stillness and humility:  
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
Then imitate the action of the tiger;  
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,  
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;  
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;  
Let pry through the portage of the head  
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it  
As fearfully as doth a galled rock  
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,  
Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.  
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,  
Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit  
To his full height. On, on, you noblest English.  
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!  
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,  
Have in these parts from morn till even fought  
And sheathed their swords for lack of argument:  
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest  
That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.  
Be copy now to men of grosser blood,  
And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,  
Whose limbs were made in England, show us here  
The mettle of your pasture; let us swear  
That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not;  
For there is none of you so mean and base,  
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.  
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:  
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge  
Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'

## YOUR MILLION-DOLLAR VOICE! RUTH'S TRUTHS

1. Your voice is a unique and one-of-a-kind way to connect with your audience.
2. Vocal production consists of 3 overall parts: Tone, Breath and Rhythm.
3. Tone refers to how your voice sounds.
4. Vocal tone sounds different to you than it does to others.
5. Variety is the ability to adjust and modify your pitch within sentences, phrases and even single words. It's what gives your words *meaning*.
6. Variety is completely dependent on the passion you feel for your topic. The more passion, the more vocal variety.
7. Avoid the “corporate monotone.” It is common, virulently contagious and guaranteed to put people to sleep. It is the opposite of vocal variety.
8. Resonance refers to the quality of your tone. A resonant voice can be described as rich, ringing, booming, round, warm or all of these things.
9. Resonance makes it easier to find your Optimum Pitch Level (OPL).
10. Your OPL should be comfortable and never feel strained.
11. Your HPL (Habitual Pitch Level) may not be your OPL.
12. A too-high, too-nasal HPL is common today, so *beware*.
13. Proper breath support gives your voice power and energy, which allow you to project.
14. Projection is about vocal energy and intensity, not volume.
15. Rhythm refers to the “percussive” aspects of speech such as your rate, pace and articulation (aka diction) and heavily influences comprehensibility.
16. Accents and dialects are problems ONLY if they make it difficult for your audiences to understand what you are saying—thus, your message—thus, your ability to connect.
17. Rate and pace have to be adapted to your audience. Change just enough to enhance connectibility.
18. Record your voice and LISTEN so you can hear yourself as others hear you.
19. Damage can occur, but usually heals easily IF YOU TAKE CARE OF IT. Stay constantly in tune with the way your voice *feels*. If it feels off for an extended period of time, you may need to seek professional, medical help.
20. Keep your voice lubricated. Water is best.

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## **FOR MORE INFORMATION AND IDEAS...**

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