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## **Future firm: Voice coaching can give you a winning edge**

**While intellect is the driving force behind the rise of many lawyers, a weak speaking voice can inhibit their performance and potentially stall their career, writes Cameron Cooper**

Most people have experienced it – that terrifying public-speaking moment when all the air seems to have been sucked out of your lungs and the voice becomes strained and weak rather than being a powerful instrument. For barristers and lawyers, that loss of voice can be career-limiting. An inability to get your message across strongly in the courtroom or at a meeting of partners may flatten out your professional trajectory.

Lucy Cornell, founder of Sydney-based studio Voice Coach, has heard it all before. A designated voice teacher with accreditation from renowned Scottish-born voice master Kristin Linklater, she has over the years worked with a range of industry and corporate clients such as the Australian Bar Association, NSW Bar Association, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Freehills, McKinsey, Citigroup, UBS, IBM, Bloomberg and major banks. Cornell specialises in helping CEOs, barristers and senior executives who may have to present speeches at shareholder or board meetings, deliver a keynote speech or converse effectively with their peers and work teams. It is common for business people to request voice training as they move through the ranks.

“Most of them have got to the level they’re at because of their technical expertise and when you get to the C-level area your role is to be a voice for the business and to be a conduit for the message,” Cornell says. Describing the proper use of voice as an art form, she says “it takes a lot of courage to speak”.

“And unless you’re practised at it your body is designed to shut down under threat or run away or fight. So the skill is being able to stay open and available to the intellectual impulses that you want to communicate.”

### **The ‘habitual’ voice**

So what is wrong with most people’s voices? Cornell surmises that about nine out of 10 people have a ‘habitual’ or ‘civilised’ voice – that is, one that is shaped by their learning and life experiences. What typically occurs is that the voice is repressed into a “smaller, less expansive, less expressive capacity than when you were a baby, for instance”.

Different factors are often at play between the genders. “(Women) tend to come into my studio a little off their voice,” Cornell says. “They’re not in the core of their sound, they’re not in the centre of their

voice, they're not as resonant as they could be, they lose the depth of their voice, so they're not able to carry the gravitas or authority."

Men, by contrast, tend to speak too quickly. "It's the intellect that seems to be supreme and the depth and length of the voice isn't there, so they're not able to communicate. It's all about authority and gravitas and presence really, so it's when they feel like that's lacking it always comes out in the voice."

Much of Cornell's work is with women, including those at the Australian Institute of Company Directors who are being developed for board roles. The aim is to ensure the women have a voice of sufficient power that will cut it in the boardroom. Improving the voice increases "(your) permission to have a voice in the room", Cornell says.

### **Good vibrations**

In a technical sense, Cornell says something that is tense will not easily vibrate. So it is with the voice.

"You want to have your body as relaxed and as present and as available and as confident as possible so that your voice can vibrate freely through that," she says. Cornell often starts the process of reinventing a person's voice by getting the subject to be more physically confident, but not in a "sticking-my-chest-out" way because that is merely a bluff. More important is the ability to "carry integrity through your presence", which then translates to the voice.

"Confidence comes from that and the receiver, the audience the person in the room, the board members, they feel that, they experience that and they feel confidence in you and then it's a virus really; it feeds on itself."

Asked to name some engaging speakers, Cornell first cites politicians such as Robert Menzies and Paul Keating, who not only had a gift for language but the capacity to deliver a message. She notes that Commonwealth Bank chief executive Ralph Norris has won praise for being able to take time and be more considerate in the way he speaks than many business leaders. And while influential business leader David Gonski does not have an extremely powerful voice, he is "really brilliantly connected to his inner integrity, which comes out truthfully in his voice but in a very humanistic way".

Cornell says the aim is to balance an inner voice, a physical voice and an external mythical voice. "So when it rings from three levels like that, that's when you want to follow someone. That's certainly what Barack Obama does, that's what Martin Luther King did."

### **Practise makes perfect**

Improving a person's voice requires an initial blast of coaching and then long-term practice. First, a

diagnostic process is required to find out what works and what does not with a person's voice. The key is awareness, according to Cornell.

"Business people are very numb perceptively in that they're not very good at feeling 'my breath is going there in my body'. You say that to actors and they say 'it's in my left lung in my bottom quarter'. They're so aware, but business people aren't very aware because they just don't live in their bodies – they live in their heads so much more." The aim is to become aware of physical, emotional and psychological holding patterns.

Second, a series of sophisticated practical exercises are designed to help retrain the breath and the voice. "We're looking at what your breathing's doing because nobody breathes these days," Cornell says. "You've got to get your breath going because that's where the life of your voice comes from, and then connecting your vibration voice up to your free body and breath." Language comes later because the voice has to be right first.

Cornell says the relearning process calls on a person's senses. "It's very holistic ... so I often have people lying on the floor of my studio breathing and my knees next to them listening to what the breath's doing."

How long does it take to train a person, reprogram their brain and change their breathing and speaking habits? Cornell typically starts with about six one-hour sessions to launch the process of change, but says "it's ongoing". The aim is to alter very deep subconscious patterns and ensure that the voice automatically functions properly under pressure.

"When people speak in front of a group most don't stop and think 'oh, my breathing's stopped, my breathing's not happening' because they just want to get into the message," she says. "So it's all about re-patterning that so they're very aware of the breath and they can change that in the moment. So it's really important to do the core training and then ongoing support just to continue the practice afterwards because the brain just doesn't change otherwise."

### **Being heard**

Over a number of years, Cornell has worked with the Australian and NSW Bar associations and various law firms to help improve the vocal performance of barristers and lawyers, particularly female practitioners. She observes that many female graduates enter law as "very strong and clear and articulate" communicators. "And then after about four or five years they lose their voice," she says.

Cornell believes two factors are at play. First, at that stage of their career some women are making lifestyle choices that have an impact on their work, confidence and sense of professional worth. Second,

as they approach partnership they are increasingly competing in an “aggressive, male-dominated culture”. “It’s very hard to get your voice heard,” she says, “even if you do have a strong voice.”

With barristers, the challenge is somewhat different. They have to cope under the pressure of the intimidating environment of a courtroom and power struggles that occur with judges, opposing barristers and clients.

Cornell explains: “Barristers are generally very good at the intellectual part of it, and often what happens is they just become these walking brains and we can’t even hear them ... For me, it’s about getting them much more physically present and really arriving in the space, breathing and connecting because for them it’s about buying more time and space, and you can do that by breathing ... In performance and acting, in sport and music and any great art, the premise underlying it is you need to have minimum effort in order to have maximum energy, so for barristers most of them are so bound physically that they have maximum effort. They also want to have maximum energy, but they can’t because the voice is squeezing through this tiny little hole. The idea is to open physically in order for their connection to happen with more flow, more power.”

Cornell says it is a privilege to help people improve their voice.

“I get so excited when I see it. I love seeing people change and expand.”

*Voice Coach is based in Sydney. Visit [www.voicecoach.net](http://www.voicecoach.net).*