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VIEWS

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BREATHE IT! SING IT! IMAGINE IT! DO IT!

INSPIRATION FOR EXPRESSING AUTHENTIC VOICE

BY LAURIE TEMA-LYN

Practical Imagination Enterprises ■ Ringoes, NJ ■
laurie@practical-imagination.com

Among the excellent presentations at QRCA's October 2010 national conference was a lunch workshop given by vocal coach Claude Stein.

Claude helps individuals and professionals express their authentic voice to captivate an audience, inspire leadership and communicate effectively and authentically.

As qualitative research consultants, our role is to help our clients hear the voices of consumers. No small task indeed! So it was with great anticipation that I participated in the workshop, wishing to build on my own vocal skills and experiences.

We started as a group by listing attributes of an "authentic voice," cover-

ing a wealth of definitions, including honesty, spontaneity, warmth and relaxation. Soon, Claude had us standing on our feet and singing, gently at first, then with more gusto. In one exercise, we stood facing a partner and sang directly to them, acknowledging that we heard them and that their voice was "that of an angel." It was an exciting experience, a great way to build rapport among conference participants, and a bit self-conscious for some of us.

It is the intention of this article to pick up on Claude's presentation by offering a variety of tools, tips and ideas to express our voices powerfully, authentically and spontaneously (and, to have some fun in the process!). It is not about

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The 2011 QRCA Global Outreach Scholarship offers the recipient:

- ▶ **free membership of QRCA** (provided they are not already a member) for the remainder of the 2011 membership year after the Scholarship is awarded;
- ▶ **free conference registration**; and
- ▶ **up to \$1,000 USD for travel expenses** to attend the QRCA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, USA, from October 12-14, 2011.



Full information about the 2011 Global Outreach Scholarship, including specific details about the qualifying criteria and application process, together with downloadable copies of the Scholarship Guidelines and Application Form, is available on QRCA's website at **www.QRCA.org**. The closing date for applications is **Friday 3 June 2011**.

This is an exciting and very valuable opportunity and we encourage you to find out more about what the 2011 QRCA Global Outreach Scholarship can offer you.



My research collaborators and many of my clients know that I always warm up with breathing and vocal exercises before conducting any qualitative research, consulting engagement or meeting with clients or prospects. If I am going to use my voice in any way, and if I want to feel relaxed, comfortable and in my game, I warm up, even if only for a few minutes.

trying to become a singer, actor or yogi! These approaches allow me to be more relaxed, present and confident when facilitating workshops, and I hope you will find them useful in your own business practice.

As Babies, We Are Inherently “Musical”

We can make all the sounds of all the languages of the world. We can croon on pitch, matching the music that we hear around us, especially the singing voices of other humans in our midst. However, through socialization and education, we learn to do things “the right way” — we take in the criticism of others and we lose touch with *our* way. The self-censor begins to take over, stopping our musical expression. Yes, some people have the bones and muscle to be great singers; many are “naturally” talented with a clear, lovely, on-pitch singing voice; and others, less so. But I have seen friends decide, even in middle age, to take the plunge to learn how to sing, discovering that when they let go of their fear, or that inner judge who says “I can’t,” they discover the “I can” skills to produce a very pleasing voice. More importantly, they derive great satisfaction from the experience.

I am a true *amateur* singer, in that I sing for “the love of it.” I was fortunate to grow up with parents who appreciated a wide variety of music and encouraged us to sing and to join school choruses and musical theater. With little formal training, I have spent my whole life enjoying and being an active participant. Music has been the catalyst for amazing journeys throughout the world, friendships, healing through difficult times and, yes, skills that have been directly — very

directly — beneficial to my work as a consultant and a qualitative market research professional.

My Secret Is Out!

My research collaborators and many of my clients know that I always warm up with breathing and vocal exercises before conducting any qualitative research, consulting engagement or meeting with clients or prospects. If I am going to use my voice in any way, and if I want to feel relaxed, comfortable and in my game, I warm up, even if only for a few minutes. I do these exercises in a hotel room, in a facility ladies’ room, in a focus room (with the mikes off!), in the car, the train, on a plane and even on a street corner in downtown Manhattan.

When in Doubt, Breathe!

Breathing is the root of it all. Without breathing, there is no sound, no voice. When we are tense, the breath is cut off and doesn’t flow well, and not breathing fluidly causes a vicious cycle of tension and perhaps even anxiety. Of course, breathing is meant to be an automatic process, but sometimes it is good to remind ourselves to breathe, to relax and re-center ourselves, especially before doing demanding work.

The first tip I will share is simply to take a few gentle, relaxed breaths, paying attention to the air that comes into your lungs and diaphragm and the air as it goes out. (You know, healthy human beings generally don’t suffer from a lack of oxygen, but rather from a build up of carbon dioxide in the body.) As you breathe out, what do you notice? Is any part of your body “tight”? For many of us, the muscles of the neck, head and shoulders, face and, especially, the jaw are prone to holding tension. As you

exhale, try to just let it go and release the tension. The simple act of expanding and contracting the chest allows us to experience freedom of movement. After you have taken these few relaxing, centering breaths, practice speaking out loud the first sentence you plan to say to your clients, research subjects or members of your audience. Now try practicing those opening sentences as if you were trying to reach people on the other side of a large room. Do you have to shout to be heard, or can you engage your imagination first and find another way to express your intended message?

Just the other day, I heard Anne Hathaway being interviewed about her experience working with Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Anne said that in the first read-through, she expected Meryl to be loud and abrasive in conveying her bossy character. Instead, she chose to speak in a whisper, getting everyone in the room to lean in to her every word. Meryl held all the power in the room; the authentic voice of her character mesmerized her fellow actors.

Other Breathing Exercises to Explore

Integration Breath

This is an exercise I have adopted from a routine called Psychocalisthenics,[®] a series of breathing and movement exercises that I have been doing off and on for more than 30 years. You can do this exercise standing or seated. If you are standing, get in a nice relaxed posture with your feet about shoulder width apart. Gently clasp your hands together (heels of the hands lightly touching). Inhaling slowly, bring your hands up front and over your head, until you touch behind your neck or back,

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whatever is most comfortable. Keep your head straight; don't duck it forward or tilt back. Then exhale gently, slowly, as you bring your still-clasped arms down. Make sure there is no strain in either the breath or the movement. Continue doing this sitting or standing in a fluid movement, at least three times. Did you feel your breath move up and down your body, from your toes to the top of your head?

Side-to-Side Breathing

You can do this standing or seated, and the exercise is perfect for clearing your mind and bringing you present. While you inhale slowly, gently turn your head to the left as far as you can go without straining, trying to align with your left shoulder. Gently exhale as you move your head to the right, releasing the breath by the time you reach center, then softly begin to inhale as you move your head to the right, exhaling as you move the head back to center. Do this three or more times from side to side. Aim for feeling a slow, seamless, effortless movement from side to side. Don't over-extend or push your neck beyond what is comfortable for you.

Vocal Warm Ups

These are fun and effective, though you may feel a little foolish doing them the first few times! They help you loosen up and let go of tensions in your face and voice that you might not have realized you were holding in the first place.

Lip Trills

The idea is to get your lips nicely relaxed and loose, which is great when you know you have a lot of talking to do! The sound you make is like a "brbrbrbrbr" with just your lips and your breath. You can do it on just one note, any note that you like. When you

get comfortable, try moving the notes up and down in a partial scale. Sometimes this is referred to as the Bubble because, if you can, imagine that you are swimming, with your head submerged underwater, and you are gently blowing air out of your lips. Now try the exercise without the water, and just let your lips vibrate gently while you control the flow of air by moving your diaphragm. If your lips feel tight, place a finger from each hand on the sides of your face, and gently push in your cheeks (where the dimples would be).

Humming

A soft vocal sound that is very useful for warming up the voice, humming can be done in a variety of ways, on a single note, using a scale or humming a simple tune. For humming, you want to experiment with where you place the sound. Start by lightly closing your lips and making a soft, small sound to the word "Hmmm???" That question on your lips will naturally bring your vocal pitch up a bit. Experiment with it, and see if you can start to feel a little buzz in your lips. As you go higher in pitch, you will feel the buzz higher in your face — in your cheeks, nose or eye sockets. Another way to do this is to imagine that you start by softly singing an "Ahhh..." with your tongue down and toward the back of your mouth, and then close your lips. You will have formed a little circular resonating chamber in your mouth.

If you start with an "Hmmm..." not as a question, but as if a statement, or a doubting expression, you can more easily feel the slide downwards, and you will feel the vibration or the resonance in your chest area.

Barking

This is so much fun to do! You can start with a short, fast, little "woof, woof,

woof" and lead up to a great, big "RUFF!!" Begin with an image of a dog, small or large, yours or another's. You will find that it is nearly impossible to just bark without getting a little movement into the mix, so you will likely end up warming up more than just your vocal chords, chest and throat.

Meowing and Purring

This is also a sweet little exercise to do, and it will have you exploring more of your vocal range and pitch. How high can you go? How deep can you go? I like to start with an image of a contented cat, perhaps curled up on a sunny windowsill. The cat sees you, a friend, and starts a meow. You can build up to a big, deep, territorial "MEOW" if you like. Now imagine that little cat has fallen asleep on your chest and has started to purr. The meow morphs into a sound, deep in the throat, that is like a vibrating "ddddddddddd." You can purr, too, with a relaxed tongue on the top of the roof of your mouth, with your lips slightly open. Cats' purr is a form of communication, whether for contentment or trauma. I have seen studies that say that the measurable Hertz of a cat's purr lies between 25 and 150, and coincidentally (or not?) that is the same sound frequency that can stimulate bone growth and healing.

Exploring Your Voice Is Easy and Delightful!

Here are some tips from friends and authors Robert Dickman and Richard Maxwell from their 2007 book, *The Elements of Persuasion*. "Just start singing. Sing in the shower first — the tile surface gives your voice good reverb, and the warm water helps relax the muscles of your neck and chest. Keep your breathing deep, your diaphragm relaxed, your throat open, and, above

all, enjoy yourself. Remember how much fun singing was when you were a kid; let yourself thoroughly enjoy it. And sing all sorts of songs. Sappy love songs. Rollicking drinking songs. Patriotic anthems. Rock and roll. Religious hymns. Faux Italian opera. You're alone in the shower. Go where your heart wants to go, wherever the melody leads you. Just go all the way."

By the way, you can find many more breathing and vocal exercises like these just by Googling "vocal warm ups." You will even find sound and movie clips that demonstrate the techniques.

Putting These Exercises to Work for You

Of course, your prep work goes a lot further than just your breathing and warming up your voice. What is your gig? Who is your audience? What is your intention?

Are you about to go into a series of qualitative groups with snack-food lovers, or in-depth conversations with sophisticated surgeons? Presenting findings and rich stories from a multi-stage initiative with the senior leadership team from your client? Or talking with teens about how much time they spend immersed in social media? Each scenario will dictate a different kind of preparation and game plan. Hopefully, that includes rehearsing both mentally (in your mind's eye, or voice, so to speak) and out loud.

If you are running groups, and you plan to read concepts to your participants, what options might you consider? Clear, clean, "neutral" tone? Or would a resounding James Earl Jones rendition be more appropriate for the subject matter? Before you try on another character, remind yourself of your intention, and let your own, true, authentic voice have its power. Are you working with a group of participants from New York City? Then you just might want to quicken your pace a few notches. If you are working with a group of Southerners, slowing down a bit will help them better understand you. And if you are talking with young people, perhaps you will sprinkle a few of the latest buzzwords into your speech. Most important, though, will be how well you listen, so that you can authentically

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Author and satirist Fran Leibowitz noted an interesting observation about talking and listening: “The opposite of talking isn’t listening. The opposite of talking is waiting.”

reflect back what you hear and see in order to build a comfortable rapport.

If your gig demands that you will be presenting a fair amount of material, try practicing out loud by taking on different characters — an elder, an extrovert, a comic, a mother, a superhero. Each character might help you explore different ways of effectively communicating your information. Ultimately, though, you come back to center, to yourself and to your own authentic voice, now enriched by trying on different personas.

Building on vocal coach Claude’s ideas, you might also experiment with singing the most difficult words or phrases of your material, using a simple melody you make up or something familiar like “Happy Birthday” or “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore” or “On Top of Old Smokey.” You may find this will help bring a more natural rhythm, comfort and authority to your communication.

Singing Affirmations

The last vocal tip I would like to share also builds off of Claude’s work, although I don’t believe he named it as such. I call it Vocal Affirmations. It is a message to yourself of whatever you want to be reminded of. For example: Sing out the phrase, “These groups will be fun!” or “I’ll do a great job!” or “The clients will be thrilled with what they learn!” or “I’ll be very smooth talking with these surgeons.” Make up a little melody, or just sing it out on one note. Sing it softly first, and notice your breathing. Adjust your breathing if you find yourself getting stuck or if your voice starts to tense up. Sing it

sweetly, as if to a baby. Sing it loudly, as if to a cheering crowd. Sing it out as if it were the funniest thing you ever uttered. Sing it out, as if it were fact.

Using pitch, pace and intonation...

Whether moderating focus groups or making a presentation to a large group, when we are emotionally connected to our material, we naturally vary our pitch, tone and pace of speaking. Just as an actor will rehearse delivering lines in various ways, I find that it can help to specifically plan ahead times when I will consciously use my voice, tone and pace for different effects.

For example, if I want to lead a group through an exercise to recall childhood memories, I will begin by asking participants to take a few quiet, slow, relaxed breaths so that they can begin imagining themselves back into another time and another place. My voice becomes very quiet, almost a whisper, as I slowly and deliberately give these instructions. Conversely, if it is late in the day and we are getting fatigued as I ask participants to give feedback to yet another concept board, I just may get very animated, speak louder, faster, perhaps even stand up in front of the group in order to change the energy. My voice is higher — more soprano than alto — and faster, in order to re-energize the group, and myself!

Listening

And while the focus of this article is on speaking, we could not really do justice to the topic without saying at least a few words about listening. Many years ago, author and satirist Fran Leibowitz

noted an interesting observation about talking and listening: “The opposite of talking isn’t listening. The opposite of talking is waiting.” I would add that good listening, and having the patience to wait, makes us better speakers, as well.

As qualitative research consultants, we really have to listen, and not just with our ears, but also with our eyes, skin, muscle. I think listening in our work is a very active process, and more of a whole-body, whole-mind kind of exercise. Not so easy to do for prolonged periods of time, but essential to attempt. Some of us, myself included, can get rather impatient and be tempted to rush to fill in the lulls in conversation or in responses from our research participants.

Again, learning from my music background, I have come to appreciate those quiet moments even more, and I think of them like the rest notes in a piece of music. They give us a moment to reflect, to absorb what has come before, to get ready for what will come next, to breathe, and to set apart the next rush of sounds. Giving participants this time to pause might feel a bit awkward at first, like dead time when every minute seems to count. However, if we remind ourselves and our clients beforehand that this might happen, and if we do not punish our participants if they cannot jump up and down with an immediate response to our question, we just might find that we will get better quality responses and a more comfortable pace for interaction.

Breathing, vocalizing, imagining... all coming together fluidly to help you be more successful at your craft. 

