

MODULE

08

The Voice

The second leg — resonance, timbre, and the rhythm that carries a room

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Thirty-eight percent of an audience connects to you through your voice alone. This module is about what that voice is actually doing when it works.

Voice is the second leg of the stool and, in the UCLA research, the second strongest channel at 38%. The question is what your voice is doing to show an audience you are real, credible and worth believing.

Two properties matter especially. **Resonance** is the intensity of your voice, and it changes how people receive and believe what you say. **Timbre** is the quality of the sound itself. Both respond to emotion — a voice finds a rhythm when there is passion behind it, and stays flat when there is not.

The failure case is instructive. When Jair Bolsonaro was sworn in in Brazil, he read his speech from papers held in his hands rather than standing at a podium with teleprompters, which the country certainly had. Holding the pages tied up a hand, which killed his gesturing. His voice underneath the interpretation was flat and fast. People stood far too close to him, including an interpreter who — because interpreters convey emotion by nature — ended up more expressive than the president himself.

The successes show the opposite. Barbara Jordan at the 1992 Democratic Convention built her entire address on repetition and enunciation, repeating a phrase roughly every third or fourth segment. Tested, audiences said she believed every word. Al Pacino's courtroom speech in *Scent of a Woman* works because a blind character cannot use most body language, so pace, rhythm and emotion carry everything — mostly indignation, softened deliberately at intervals.

38%

connect through the
voice

3-4

segments between
repeats, Barbara Jordan

1968

RFK in Indianapolis

KEY CONCEPTS

Resonance

The intensity of your voice. Intensity changes how people hear a statement and whether they believe it.

Timbre

The quality of the sound your voice makes. Distinct from volume or pitch, and part of why some voices hold a room and others do not.

Repetition as rhythm

Barbara Jordan repeated key phrases roughly every third or fourth segment. It is not redundancy — it is what tells the ear a line matters, and it is what audiences remember.

Understatement as a choice

A big voice is not always the right voice. Sometimes the moment demands that you come down rather than up, and audiences can tell the difference between restraint and flatness.

FROM THE VIDEO**Robert F. Kennedy, Indianapolis, 4 April 1968**

Kennedy landed in Indianapolis to learn that Martin Luther King had been assassinated in Memphis. He was due to speak to a largely African-American audience. His staff and the local sheriff told him not to go — riots were breaking out nationally and it was too dangerous. He went anyway, and refused the speech his staff had prepared.

The audience did not know yet. In 1968 there was no instant news. He told them himself, then spoke about bitterness, about the choice between revenge and understanding, and about his own brother being killed by a white man.

His voice was deliberately understated throughout. When Steve's team tested it, audiences said that was exactly right — had he gone up and down, it would have read as disrespectful to the magnitude of the moment.

It has since been reported that a group came to that speech intending to kill Kennedy. Indianapolis was one of the only major American cities that did not riot that night. Most of that is attributed to this speech.

REMEMBER

- Flat and fast is the same failure wearing two hats.
- Repetition every third or fourth segment is a rhythm, not a crutch.
- Sometimes the powerful choice is down, not up. Read the moment.
- Tying up one hand with papers or a microphone costs you your gestures.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Map your vocal range

Take four sentences and deliberately deliver each with a different vocal quality: loud, quiet, fast, slow. Record all four.

Which felt most like your natural default?

Which was hardest, and what happened when you pushed into it?

Play them back with your eyes closed. Where did your voice go flat without you noticing?

EXERCISE 2**Build repetition into something real**

Barbara Jordan repeated a phrase every third or fourth segment. Try it on your own material.

Write a short passage you need to deliver — five or six segments.

Now rewrite it with one phrase repeated at least three times.

Read both aloud and record them. Which one lands?

EXERCISE 3**Practise understatement**

Most speakers only know how to add energy. Learn to take it away without going flat.

Take your most serious or difficult line. Deliver it once at full force, then once quietly and slowly. Which serves the content better?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Recorded both versions
- ☐ Played them to someone else
- ☐ Noticed the difference between restraint and flatness

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: